

THE
MYSTERIES
OF THE
COURT OF LONDON



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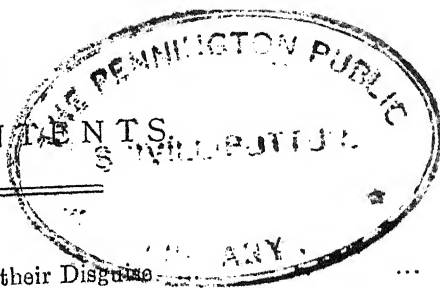
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The Mysteries

OF

The Court of London

VOLUME VII.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

THE WOLVES THROWING OFF THEIR DISGUISE.

In the meantime Louisa had sought the chamber where she had passed the preceding night; and she immediately began to pack up her trunk for departure. Not for an instant did she suspect that the Marquis of Leveson had dared negative her orders to fetch the post-chaise: but still she felt that she should breathe more freely when beyond the threshold of this grand aristocratic mansion, the very atmosphere of which seemed heavy, oppressive, and ominous of the dead lull and stifling closeness which pervades the outburst of the storm.

Scarcely had she finished packing her trunk when Lady Ernestina Dysart entered the chamber.

"My dear Louisa," said the artful woman, assuming a look of such well-feigned sorrow that the maiden was completely thrown off her guard thereby, and began to fancy that she had wronged even the Marquis himself by her suspicions,— "my dear Louisa," repeated her ladyship, in the most soothing, endearing, and sympathetic tone, "I am truly vexed that you purpose to leave us suddenly: but my uncle desires me to say that he will watch for your sister's return home in company with her kind friends Mr. and Mrs. Beckford, and he will let you know through me

when you can come back to London with the certainty of meeting her."

"I am truly grateful," said our heroine, "for this proof of kind consideration on the part of his lordship and yourself;"— but still Louisa spoke with a certain degree of restraint, for she could not give facile utterance to words that came not wholly from her heart.

"Oh! do not thank me for anything which I may do for you," exclaimed Ernestina, "it is a real pleasure to serve so sweet a girl as yourself. And now, my dear Louisa, as it will be a quarter of an hour at least before the post-chaise is ready, I have ordered refreshments to be served up in my own chamber: and thither must you accompany me, so that we may have a few minutes' *tete-a-tete* before you leave."

This proposal was made with so much friendly candour and winning affability that Louisa did not hesitate to accept it. Lady Ernestina accordingly led the way first into the Crimson Drawing-Room, and thence into the adjoining apartment, the elegance of which naturally excited Louisa's admiration, notwithstanding the claims which other and far more serious matters had upon her thoughts. But her patrician guide did not allow her much leisure to contemplate this room, with its luxurious sofas ranged all round the walls, its splendid porcelain vases exhaling delicious perfumes, and its exquisitely chased silver lamp suspended to the ceiling. Opening the door at the farther extremity,

Ernestina conducted the maiden into the next room. where, as the reader will remember, the carpet was the thickest ever trodden upon, and where the arm-chairs were the most massive ever seen.—provided too with cushions of corresponding proportions.

"This is the anteroom to my own chamber," said the false-speaking and evil-intentioned Ernestina; "and I ordered the refreshments to be served up here. I suppose the footman must have misunderstood me," she continued assuming a tone of vexation. "Sit down, my dear girl," she added affably pointing to a chair: "and I will ring the bell for luncheon."

Louisa unhesitatingly proceeded to place herself where the treacherous lady thus pointed: but scarcely had the young virgin's form made its imprint upon the flocculent cushion, when the sudden click of the secret mechanism was heard and she found herself strangely but alarmingly held captive by means of the springs that clasped her wrists and the steel bands that fastened their gripe upon her shoulders.

The terror of consternation for a few moments sealed her lips: but as she beheld Lady Ernestina suddenly disappear through a door which opened in the wall exactly facing the treacherous chair, the unfortunate girl saw indeed too well that she was betrayed, and a piercing scream burst from her lips. But almost immediately after Ernestina had flitted away so abruptly, and while that rending scream was still vibrating through the suite of rooms, the Marquis of Leveson stood before his intended victim!

He had entered by that same door through which his niece had fled, and closing it behind him, he at once said, in a low but earnest tone, "Louisa, your cries are unavailing: no mortal ear do they reach beyond the four walls of this room;—and therefore I need scarcely observe that you are in my power!"

"My lord, my lord," faltered the maiden, in a dying tone, while her brain grew dizzy and a film came over her eyes "take pity upon the friendless orphan who never injured you!"

"O Louisa!" exclaimed the Marquis, fixing upon her those satyr eyes that were burning with desire—"to ask mercy for yourself is to tell me to make an impossible sacrifice! Listen to me, dear girl—do not despair—do not give way to grief—do not look thus wildly, thus vaguely upon me! You know that I bear one of the loftiest and proudest titles in England—

that my riches are immense: you have seen enough of this mansion here to know that it is spacious and magnificent;—and I may add that in the loveliest sports of England there are country-seats—perfect paradise in themselves—of which I am also the possessor. Of this lofty title, then will I make thee the sharer—of this wealth will I make thee the mistress; my mansions my domains, my rural villas—all shall be thine, Louisa, if thou wilt give me thy love!"

Our heroine heard the tones of the nobleman's voice, but comprehended no what he said. There was a hurry in his brain that made her thoughts a whirlwind and threw her senses into confusion. All she knew was that some tremendous danger menaced her, and that she was sinking beneath the weight of an ineffable consternation.

The Marquis saw that she was thus overwhelmed—that her head was drooping—and that her senses were slowly abandoning her; and he thought within himself, "I will not excite nor arouse her—I will let her sink into insensibility—and then——"

* * * *

The instant Lady Ernestina Dysart had performed her treacherous part toward poor Louisa Stanley, she disappeared from the presence of the outraged maiden in the manner already described. The reader will have comprehended that she touched the secret spring and opened the invisible door communicating with her uncle's room where indeed his lordship had been awaiting the issue of the adventure.

Hastily telling him that the deed was done, Ernestina traversed the bedchamber and hurried into the Crimson Drawing Room, where she threw herself upon sofa, palpitating with excitement. For bad, depraved and unprincipled though she was, she nevertheless felt shocked and frightened in the presence of this tremendous iniquity to which she had lent herself.

Not many moments, however, did she thus give way to her painful reflection ere she was startled by the entrance of footman, saying, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon requests an immediate interview with either my Lord Marquis or your ladyship."

Ernestina was about to desire the domestic to say that neither she nor her uncle was at home, when the Baronet, who had followed close behind the footman now walked unceremoniously into the room.

The lacquey accordingly retired: as

this singular behaviour on the part of Huntingdon so increased, or indeed so completely crowned Ernestina's agitation, that, all woman of the world though she was, she felt covered with confusion.

"Pardon this intrusion, my lady," said Huntingdon, who spoke in the tone and with the air of a man bent upon the performance of some decisive part: "but I must see the Marquis immediately."

"My uncle is particularly engaged" faltered Lady Ernestina, a deep blush suffusing her cheeks and running up even unto her forehead, so that it was lost beneath the massive bands of her light brown hair.

"If I cannot see the Marquis, then," resumed Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately, "your ladyship will perhaps have the kindness to afford me an interview with Miss Louisa Stanely, who is now staying at Leveson House.

Ernestina gave a visible start as this demand smote her ears: and with the instinctive impulse of a guilty conscience, she cast her eyes rapidly towards the door communicating with the private suite of apartments.

Sir Douglas, who was keenly alive to every look or gesture on the part of the lady, and who saw in her increasing confusion something calculated to excite the most alarming suspicions, failed not to observe that glance which she involuntarily flung towards the door. He was no stranger to the existence of that suite of apartments: as one of the most intimate friends of Lord Leveson, all the treacherous or licentious mysteries thereof were well known to him;—and it was therefore natural that he should now suddenly argue the very worst. He had been told that Leveson was particularly engaged—his visit had evidently overwhelmed Lady Ernestina with confusion and dismay—and that tell-tale look which she had flung at the door of the private chambers, at once seemed to afford a clue to all that was passing.

"Ah! I understand," exclaimed the Baronet: "my friend the Marquis is in those rooms—and as I am no stranger to the mysteries of his mansion, I will, with your ladyship's permission, at once seek him there."

As he thus spoke, Sir Douglas Huntingdon listened towards the door of the private apartments: but Lady Ernestina sprang after him and caught him by the arm, exclaiming, "No, sir—you must not intrude upon my uncle's privacy!"

"I am well aware, as a matter of

course," said Huntingdon, "that my behaviour may seem somewhat extraordinary; but it will be your ladyship's fault if it now merge into downright rudeness."

"Rudeness! what do you mean, sir?" ejaculated Ernestina, a deeper crimson than before suffusing her face, and her eyes flashing angrily: "you surely, as a gentleman, are incapable of rudeness towards *me* a lady?"

"Then as a lady," cried the Baronet in a stern and even imperious tone such as perhaps he had never used in his life before,— "conduct yourself like a lady, and depend upon it I should never dream of treating you otherwise."

"Again I demand of you, sir, what you mean by this insulting observation?" cried Ernestina, now labouring under a terrible excitement.

"I mean," responded the Baronet, with a significance of look and a determination of manner that made her quail and recoil in dismay,— "I mean that if you prevent me from entering those rooms, I shall suspect that you are acquainted with all the mysteries which they contain: and this will not be highly creditable to you! Moreover, if I discover that anything outrageous or vile is now passing in those rooms, I shall be justified in setting you down as the accessory and the accomplice."

Ernestina fell crushed and annihilated upon a chair, burying her face in her hands: for it appeared to her as if her whole heart was suddenly laid bare in its boundless depravity to the view of that man who addressed her in a tone of such haughty confidence, stern remonstrance, and terrible menace.

The Baronet, having thus silenced and subdued that lady whose complicity in her uncle's licentious proceedings was now too evident, lost no time in opening the door leading into the secret apartments, and which Ernestina had ere now left unlocked after conducting Louisa thither.

* * *

Meantime the Marquis of Leveson, perceiving that Louisa Stanley was rapidly losing her consciousness, and that she was indeed fainting in that chair which so treacherously held her captive, stood for a few moments gloating upon the charms of which he hoped so soon to become the master. Her head hung down upon her bosom, of which his lustful eyes caught a slight glimpse; and the bands, clasping her shoulders, held her back in such a manner that though her charming head

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thus drooped like a flower on its tall slender stalk, yet her form was retained upright in the chair. Therefore his gaze could slowly wander over the graceful symmetry and virgin contours of that exquisite shape,—a shape that possessed all the light and airy elegance of the sylph, with just sufficient fulness to denote that the last stage of girlhood was bursting into the luxuriant bloom and ripeness of womanhood.

But just at the moment when the Marquis of Leveson fancied that our heroine was sinking into a profound insensibility, and while all his detestable passions were boiling up to a frenzied degree at what appeared to be the close consummation of his diabolical project,—just at the instant, in fact, that he believed himself to be touching on his crowning infamy,—Louisa appeared to be startled suddenly back to full consciousness.

Raising her head, she gazed for a moment—a single moment—wildly around her; then, all the tremendous truth flashing to her recollection and all the incidents of her position recurring vividly to her comprehension, she gave vent to another loud, long, and piercing scream.

"Foolish girl! I have told thee that thy cries are vain, said the Marquis, going straight up to her and looking her full in the face. "Will you be mine, I say, voluntarily?—will you yield of your own accord, and accept my hand—my fortune—my title—"

But scream upon scream thrilled from the maiden's lips; and the Marquis, stamping his foot with rage, was bursting forth into violent threat—when suddenly the door between this and the first room of the suite was thrown violently open, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon sprang into the presence of the startled nobleman and his intended victim.

"Release this young lady immediately exclaimed the Baronet, laying his hand upon the collar of the Marquis.

"What! you, Huntingdon, thus to interfere with the pursuits of an old friend?" faltered Leveson, not knowing what to think of the intrusion.

"Let us not bandy words," said the Baronet, sternly: "you see that I am resolute? Come—I understand not precisely the mechanism of this chair—but I command you to release Miss Louisa Stanley forthwith!"

The nobleman saw that Huntingdon was not only in earnest, but also fully bent upon the deliverance of the maiden; and accordingly, with a hand trembling as if

suddenly palsied, the Marquis touched the spring which instantaneously released our heroine from her captivity.

Falling at the feet of Sir Douglas Huntingdon in the enthusiasm of her joy at this sudden and providential liberation, Louisa took his hand and pressed it all the fervour of her young heart's gratitude. The Baronet hastened to raise and fixing his eyes upon the Marquis, stood by pale and trembling with rage, said, "Nothing of all this shall be known if you permit Miss Louisa Stanley to depart from your house without farther attempt of molestation. But finger be raised to impede her passage will adopt any measure—no matter how much calculated to expose you—"

"Retire then—go—depart," faltered the Marquis, with a strong effort to subdue the violence of his passion: "but beseech—I implore Miss Louisa Stanley not to betray me—and above all things not to breathe a word to the ruin of my niece!"

Our heroine's heart was too full of joy at her happy deliverance to allow tongue to utter a word: but Sir Douglas Huntingdon said emphatically, "I promise you, Leveson, on my honour as a gentleman, that nothing of all this shall be revealed elsewhere!"

Having thus spoken, the Baronet hastily conducted Louisa Stanley into the Crimson Drawing Room,—closing behind them the doors through which they passed. Lady Ernestina was no longer there: she had retired in shame, terror, and grief, to her own apartment, leaving the perplexing and menacing adventure to take its own course.

"Miss Stanley," the Baronet now said to her at the moment they were together in the Crimson Drawing Room; "have the goodness to read this note."

The damsel instantaneously took the billet which was presented to her; and an ejaculation of joy fell from her lips as she recognised her sister's handwriting. Tearing open the note, she read the following words:—

"13, STRATTON STREET,
Nov. 16th, 1814.

"The bearer of this, my ever dear Louisa, is a gentleman in whom you may confide. He will take you away from this place where you are surrounded by manifold danger, and will bring you at once to me."

"Your affectionate sister,
"CLARA."

Words are incapable of describing the delight and happiness which now sprang up in Louisa's bosom, even to the absorption for the time being of her grief on account of her lover's presumed infidelity.

"Then my sister—my beloved sister—is indeed in town," she exclaimed; "and the Marquis deceived me!"

"No, Miss Stanley—he did not altogether deceive you," answered the Baronet: "for if he had not called in Stratton Street ere now, your sister could not of course have known that you were at Leveson House or even in London at all. But the truth is this—your sister was indeed absent from town with Mr. and Mrs. Beckford; but she came back suddenly and alone in order to execute some little commission for Mrs. Beckford. She arrived in Stratton Street only a few minutes after the Marquis had left. Knowing his evil reputation, she was shocked and horrified at the idea of her sister being beneath his roof; and as I happened to call at the moment, she besought me to come with this note which you have just read. My carriage is at the door; and so soon as you are ready, I shall have much pleasure in escorting you to Stratton Street."

Louisa hastened upstairs for the bonnet and scarf, with which she speedily returned to the Crimson Drawing Room, well pleased at encountering neither the Marquis nor Lady Ernestina upon the stairs. Having rung the bell, she ordered the footman who answered the summons to have her trunk taken down to the Baronet's carriage, which was waiting at the door: and when, in a few minutes, the domestic announced that her commands had been executed, she accompanied Sir Douglas Huntingdon from Leveson House.

And now who can describe the feelings of this young, beautiful, and artless girl as she took her seat in the vehicle which was to convey her to that sister from whom she had been separated for five long months? Yet while rolling along in the handsome equipage, she did not forget to renew her thanks to Sir Douglas Huntingdon for the immense service which he had rendered her: but he assured the charming girl that he was only too happy in having arrived at Leveson House so seasonably as to rescue her from the peril in which the darkest and deepest treachery had placed her. Indeed, to tell the truth, as Sir Douglas Huntingdon contemplated with respectful admiration the lovely damsel by his side, he could not help thinking that there was even in the world a pleasure

more genuine and more sweet than to triumph over innocence,—namely, to rescue it from impending ruin!

But neither the Baronet nor Louisa had many minutes for reflection or conversation, inasmuch as the carriage soon dashed up to the door of a handsome house in Stratton Street; and looking forth from the window of the vehicle, our heroine beheld the countenance of her sister at one of the casements of the drawing-room.

In another minute Louisa was clasped—firmly, fondly clasped—in the embrace of that affectionate sister: and not only their kisses, but also their tears were mingled!

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

THE SISTERS.

THE drawing-room where the sisters thus met, was very handsomely furnished, and bore all the evidences of a refined female taste. It was the same room where Jocelyn Loftus had seen Clara Stanley on the occasion of his visit to London, and where she had given her approval of his suit in respect to Louisa.

The sisters were now alone together;—for Sir Douglas Huntingdon had not followed our heroine up into that room, but remained in an apartment below. When the first effusion of joy was over, and the first transports of delight at this meeting were somewhat subsided, Clara and Louisa sat down side by side upon the sofa, and began to contemplate each other with the deepest, tenderest interest.

On the one hand, Clara beheld her younger sister beautiful as ever, and with all that ineffable sweetness of look and innocence of mien which indicated the stainless purity of her soul: she saw her, too, at great advantage—for the pallor and the pensiveness previously occasioned by Jocelyn's supposed perfidy had now yielded to the roseate tinge of joy and the brightness of look which reflected the heart's holiest satisfaction. Clara therefore beheld her sister lovely and loveable as she was when they parted,—one of the chastest and most charming ornaments which the sex ever bestowed upon this world—an incarnation of all the sweetest, truest, and most ethereal attributes which piety or poesy ascribes unto angels!

On the other hand, Louisa beheld her sister more grandly beautiful, more superbly handsome than when they parted under the rose-covered portico of their

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Kentish cottage. She saw in Clara a magnificent woman the glory of whose charms seemed to have expanded into a finer and more dazzling bloom in the hothouse of London fashion. Nor less did it strike Louisa that everything at all girlish which might have lingered in the manners or looks of Clara some months back, had now totally departed. The finest gloss of courtly elegance seemed to rest upon her like a charm and hang about her like a spell: there was a grandeur in every movement—a brilliancy in every gesture, softened and subdued only by the polish of an exquisite refinement, and more so by the tenderness of feeling which she now experienced at this meeting with her sister. In a word, our fair young heroine, although she had ever been accustomed to look up to Clara as an elder sister, now regarded her with the deference that mingles in the affection which a daughter experiences for a mother. For Louisa still felt herself a mere girl; whereas Clara looked in every respect, not only the brilliant woman, but also the great lady. Thus Louisa, with her nineteen years and a half, felt as if she were a miss of fifteen or sixteen in the presence of this elder sister—who, though only twenty-one and a half, possessed all the worldly demeanour as well as the luxuriance of charms which characterise the superb matron of at least five or six years older.

Such were the impressions respectively made by this meeting of the sisters: and when they had gazed long and with earnest fondness upon each other, Louisa suddenly exclaimed, "O Clara! are you angry with me for having abandoned my home—for having gone to Paris—and now for having come up to London?"

"Do not talk of anger, dearest girl," said Clara, "while our hearts are yet throbbing with all the first transports of joy at this meeting. Angry with you, dearest Louisa! No, no—it were impossible! not for worlds would I bring a tear into your eyes or change into gloom those smiles which now gleam so sweetly upon your lips! Ah! dearest Louisa, it is as if I were thy mother instead of thy sister that I am now talking to thee: and it is with such a feeling that I rejoice—Oh! I rejoice unfeignedly, to be enabled to pour balm into thy wounded heart!"

"Oh! dearest Clara," interrupted Louisa, surveying her sister with mingled amazement and suspense,—"to what do you allude? Alas! you cannot as yet know my sorrows; because, when I sat down in Paris to commit them to paper and send

you an account of all that had the pen dropped from my hand vainly did I commence letter at each fresh attempt only rendered wounds more painful—it was like molten lead upon the seared flesh! Pardon me, therefore, for having thus preserved a silence which may seem unkind—nay, even in

"Enough—enough! dearest," exclaimed Clara, throwing her arm round her young sister's neck and drawing that innocent head until it rested upon her bosom: "from your lips apology—no excuse,—especially well acquainted with much that I have said. And to keep you no longer in suspense, let me assure you that I am innocent!"

"Innocent!" echoed Louisa, sweet lips thus repeating in constant assurance which other sweet lips breathed in tenderness; "innocent repeated, raising her head and touching her sister's bosom, her looks began to glitter with mingled joy, hope, and confidence. "Oh! if this were true, were true!"—and she clasped her arms with a gesture expressive of emotions.

"It is as I assure you, my sister," rejoined Clara Stanley, "I will not deceive you for a moment: no—not for worlds would I ever let you be deceived. You were your heart's best affections are engaged."

"Oh! this is happiness—this is indeed!" murmured Louisa, flinging herself into her sister's arms and weeping tears of love, and gratitude, upon her bosom.

"Dear Louisa, this is the moment that I have experienced for the first time," murmured Clara, in a voice that was tremulous and low.

And then she also wept: but we will not say whether the tears that now fell down her cheeks, welled forth from a heart unalloyed with pain and mixed with self-reproach as those which her sister experienced—that fair and innocent sister whose tears moistened Clara's heaving bosom and purified their crystal purity!

"And are you sure—very sure of this, dearest Clara?" inquired Louisa, again raising her head and bending her sister a countenance beaming with smiles of innocence and delight. "Oh! yes—I see that you are so, and I will not ask you to repeat your assurance!"

"Rely upon what I say, dearest Louisa," answered Clara. "If I were not thus confident upon the subject, I would not for a moment venture the assertion: if a doubt existed in my mind, I would rather have left you in the belief of your lover's infidelity, than encourage a hope which after all might turn out to be delusive! Not only is your lover innocent, dearest Louisa—but he is one of the most injured and persecuted of men in all that concerns his imprisonment in the Prefecture of Police, and one of the most virtuous and honourable of young men in all that regards his fidelity towards you and the temptations to which he has been subjected."

"Jocelyn, Jocelyn! to think that I should have mistrusted thee so profoundly!—to think that I should have wronged thee so immensely!" murmured Louisa, shaking her head in despair. "And yet heaven knows that circumstantial evidence which told against thee, Jocelyn was to all appearances crushing and overwhelming! For did not the Prefect himself assure me of dreadful things!—did I not behold with my own eyes a scene too well calculated to make me mistrust thee?—did I not even hear that female's voice proclaim her love for thee?"

"Ah! now, my dearest Louisa," exclaimed Clara, "you are torturing yourself with misgivings, in spite of the certainties which I have breathed in your ears. It is true that I am not acquainted with all the minute details of these matters to which you are alluding: but in general terms I can assure you that your lover is innocent—that he is even of the most rigid virtue—that his purity is incorruptible—and that whatever complexion circumstantial evidence may have been made to assume against him, he will be enabled to clear up every thing!"

"But one word more, Clara," exclaimed Louisa: "one word more—and then farewell to all misgivings! Is he really living under a false name?"

"Yes—that most assuredly he is," exclaimed the elder sister; "and to his honour and credit is this very fact which has been made not only the cause of his arrest, but also one of the grounds of his reproach. But I shall leave to *him*, Louisa, when the time comes, the duty of explaining to you wherefore he has assumed this name of *Jocelyn Loftus* and what his real name is. For I feel assured that these revelations will flow more sweetly upon your ears and sink down more deliciously into your heart, when coming from the lips of a lover, even than from those

of a fond and affectionate sister. And now one word more relative to Jocelyn as we must still continue to call him——"

"Oh! what else have you to say upon this subject?" asked Louisa with renewed suspense.

"That in a short time—a very short time, I hope—he will be free," returned Clara. "Indeed, I am *convinced* that he will soon be liberated: and then, dear girl, he will no doubt rejoice to give you all those explanations which must triumphantly prove his own innocence and dispel all the misgivings that still perhaps lurk in the depths of your soul!"

"He will be free—O heavens! that there may be no disappointment or delay in the fulfilment of this hope!" exclaimed Louisa once more clasping her hands and now gazing upward with a fervid enthusiasm, so that it was easy to perceive that in the depths of her soul she prayed to heaven to verify her sister's assurance.

"Whatever I tell you, dearest Louisa, you may rely upon," rejoined Clara. "And now that I have relieved you from so much anxiety and changed your sorrow into heartfelt joy, you must give me all the particulars of what has occurred to you relative to that journey to Paris and this visit to London."

"I will tell you everything, dear sister," answered the young maiden. "You are well aware, from the letters which I have so constantly written to you, that in the month of September Jocelyn brought Miss Mary Owen with him from London and desired that she might find a home at the cottage?"

"Yes—while he proceeded to the Continent," said Clara, taking up the thread of her sister's discourse, "in order to defeat certain machinations which had been devised against the Princess of Wales, and in which the Owen family was concerned. On all these points your letters were explicit enough."

"And I also told you," continued Louisa "that Jocelyn wrote to me a letter full of love and tenderness from the French capital, stating how he had arrived there in due course and how he had fallen in with Mary's three sisters at Calais whom he had escorted to Paris. I answered his welcome epistle; and he wrote to me another as affectionate as the first. But that was the last letter which I received from him: and then his correspondence suddenly ceased. This was at the end of September."

"And throughout the month of October," observed Clara, "your letters

to me were mournful indeed, You seemed to fancy that your lover had altogether abandoned you——"

"No, no—dearest Clara," exclaimed Louisa, blushing. "I did not *then* suspect his fidelity: but I was afraid—indeed, I was haunted with the idea, that some terrible calamity had overtaken him——"

"Well, and did I not send you all the consolation in my power?" asked Clara: "did I not conjure you to cherish hope and avoid despair?—although at the time heaven knows that I was utterly ignorant of what had really become of your lover!"

"Had it not been for your soothing and consolatory letters," said Louisa "I should have become delirious with anguish, or else have been plunged into a blank despair. Well in this manner did the month of October pass mournfully on: and just as it was drawing to a close, I received a letter, dated from Paris, and stating that it was of the highest consequence to me to repair thither without delay in order to learn certain calamitous truths relative to Jocelyn Loftus. That letter, which bore the signature of *An Unknown Friend*, desired me to proceed at once to the British Consul on my arrival in Paris, and he would give me farther information. Conceive, my dear Clara, the state of mind into which this letter threw me: and, Oh! *you* were not nigh to counsel me! I felt that it was wrong to leave our poor aunt to the care of a comparative stranger: but on the other hand it would have been madness or perhaps death for me to have remained at home, a prey to the most excruciating suspense!"

"Poor girl!" said the elder sister, hastily wiping her eyes. "No—I was not there to succour you with my advice, although I ought to have been! But go on, Louisa——go on," she repeated, with a sort of nervous impatience. "I can understand full well how it was that you yielded to the impulse of your feelings and resolved upon repairing to Paris. Under the circumstances I should have done the same: and therefore I do not blame you."

"Thank you, dear sister—thank you for that assurance!" exclaimed Louisa, smiling through the tears which had started forth upon her lashes as she spoke of her aunt. "Yes—it is as you have said! Driven wild with fearful misgiving—half frenzied and delirious—hurried along as it were by an overwhelming torrent of feeling, I became powerless for anything like calm deliberation. Mary Owen promised to bestow the most unwearied attention

upon my aunt, and to take my place in all tender ministrations towards her. I knew that my young friend was kind-hearted affectionate, and sincere and I entertained not the slightest apprehension that our afflicted relation would experience neglect at her hands. Thus, after a few very brief preparations, my departure was taken hurriedly; and without any adventure worth relating, I arrived safely in Paris. Immediately on reaching the French capital, I repaired to the British Consul and when I mentioned my name, he treated me with a kindness of manner so fully reassuring and even paternal that I was struck with the idea that he himself must be the author of the letter which was signed by *an unknown friend*. But in this respect I was speedily undeceived for, after a few observations to the purport that an excellent and kind hearted English nobleman was really the author of that letter, and was interesting himself in my behalf, the consul directed me to an hotel close at hand, where I was to inquire for the *Marquis of Leveson*. You may well understand my dear Clara, that the moment this name struck upon my ears, it carried a vague and unknown terror into the depths of my soul: for although I had heard but little of his nobleman from the lips of Mary Owen, yet this little was no in his favour."

Here we must pause for a moment to remind our reader that when Jocelyn had introduced Mary Owen to the cottage at Canterbury, he had carefully forbore from mentioning to Louisa anything beyond the mere outline of the atrocious conspiracy that was a-foot against the Princess of Wales. Especially did he avoid alluding to the infamous means which had adopted to demoralize the minds of the fair daughter of Mrs. Owen: and Mary herself with a proper feeling of delicacy, never subsequently enlightened Louisa in that respect. Thus the reader will understand that when Louisa heard the name of the Marquis of Leveson mentioned by the British Consul, she knew nothing of the *worst phases* of his character, but only that he was one of the Prince Regent's confederates in respect to the conspiracy against the Princess of Wales. Those circumstances being duly borne in mind, it will be the more easy to comprehend the ensuing details of Louisa Stanley's narrative."

"Yes—on hearing that name of *Leveson*," she continued, after a brief pause. "I felt that it was indeed probable he might know something of Jocelyn and

his part? Depend upon it, Louisa, as I ere now said, Jocelyn will give, when you meet again, the fullest and most satisfactory explanations upon all these points."

"Yes, dearest Clara," answered Louisa, in a voice tremulous with emotion, "I indeed see all those incidents in a new light. But what could I think of them at the time? Oh! I was stricken down as if the hand of death had suddenly been laid upon me: I was borne away from the spot—and for several days I remained in a state of delirium at the hotel. But the kindest attentions were shown me by the landlady, her daughters, and the medical attendant: and thus, when my mind began to emerge from the wild confusion of its ideas, I found myself the object of the tenderest solace and sympathy. I wished to hasten back to England—to return home: but the Marquis represented to me the impossibility of my travelling in the nervous and excited condition that I then was; and this representation was warmly seconded by the worthy females to whose care I was assigned. Weak as I was in body and attenuated as I felt in mind, I was over-persuaded without much difficulty. And I have already told you, Clara, how vain were the attempts I made to commit my woes to paper and correspond with you! Thus did day after day pass: and all this while the conduct of the Marquis was so kind, so respectful, and at the same time so fatherly, that I felt assured his character must either have been mistaken or unjustly treated by Mary Owen. To be brief, I experienced the deepest gratitude towards his lordship: I felt that I was indebted to him for being rescued from the snares and influences of an adventurer. But, Oh! while thus I thought in a strain so depreciatory of poor Jocelyn, the scalding tears flowed down my cheeks and I felt as if my heart would burst! It was a relief for me to quit Paris—that place which appeared to be the scene of the fatal rock on which all my fondest hopes were shipwrecked! The Marquis, with a delicacy which entirely confirmed the good opinion I had recently been forming of him, arranged that the landlady's eldest daughter should accompany us as far as Dover, so that I might not be left without female society during the journey. On arriving at Dover, this young Frenchwoman left us to return to Paris, liberally rewarded by the Marquis. Up to this moment, Clara, the idea of proceeding to London had never entered my mind. But as I was journeying with the Marquis from Dover to Canterbury, he

represented to me the propriety and even the necessity of consulting my sister—yourself, beloved Clara—and pouring my sorrows into her bosom after all that had occurred. Ah! need I tell you—need I assure you that it required but little argument to persuade me in the adoption of this course? I nevertheless insisted upon halting at Canterbury to assure myself that our afflicted aunt was properly cured for. "Mary Owen," then said the Marquis, *'is deeply prejudiced against me, and fancies that I am engaged in a conspiracy which has no other existence than in her own imagination. She will therefore believe, if you tell her you are travelling with me, that I shall snatch her away from her present retreat and bear her back to her mother. But as I do not wish to interfere with the poor girl, it will be needless for you to create any alarm in her mind. Would it not then be prudent to forbear from mentioning my name to her at all?'*—I yielded to these representations, which appeared to me so natural at the moment;—and besides, my mind was so attenuated that I really had neither the courage nor the power to think for myself, and was therefore easily led to follow any advice that was given to me at the moment by one whom I deemed a friend. I went to the cottage: I learnt privately from the faithful servant girl that Mary Owen had filled my place with the utmost tenderness towards my afflicted aunt:—and Mary Owen herself gave me the assurance that she had neglected nothing in the fulfilment of the duty entrusted to her. Few and rapid were the words that passed between us. I told her that Jocelyn was faithless to me, and a mere adventurer in society. I told her also that her sisters had proceeded to join the Princess of Wales in Italy: and I assured her that I had the best possible means for believing that the conspiracy against that august lady had in reality no actual existence. Mary Owen was astonished at this declaration on my part: she shook her head gloomily—but evidently was at a loss what to think. I told her to suspend all opinion until my return from London, when I would enter into the fullest and minutest details. Then, after this flying visit to the cottage—a visit which lasted for a brief half hour—I returned to the *Fountain Hotel* where the Marquis of Leveson's carriage had stopped. Our journey was then pursued towards London, where we arrived last evening."

Louisa Stanley now proceeded to relate the treatment she had experienced at

Leveson House—how the Marquis and Ernestina had suddenly thrown off the mask, and how the seasonable and sudden arrival of Sir Douglass Huntingdon had saved her from the treachery and outrage which the profligate nobleman had dared to contemplate. The elder sister was more than indignant—she was positively enraged at hearing this recital of the crowning dangers through which Louisa had that morning passed; and she murmured to herself “Lord Leveson shall repent of this black atrocity!”

“And now, dearest Clara,” said Louisa, throwing her arms around her sister’s neck, and gazing upon her with all her young hearts innocent and enthusiastic devotion,—“tell me, dearest Clara, are you yourself happy?—do you like the gaiety and bustle of the metropolis?—or do you long to return to the peaceful retreat at Canterbury? Tell me, in fine, all—everything that regards you.

“Yes, dearest Louisa,” answered Clara, embracing her fondly: “I will tell you everything—and you will perceive that I have all possible reason to be happy. In fact, dearest Louisa, if I have kept until some such occasion as this—I mean until we should thus meet and I could speak to you concerning many, many things which I could not so well have committed to paper—if I have kept all this till now, I say, you will not be angry——”

“Ah! my dearest sister, you have made me so happy,” cried Louisa, “by your assurances relative to Jocelyn, that I am in a humour to behold every thing in this world in the brightest and gayest colours. Yes—a roseate atmosphere now appears to surround me, displacing the murky mist in which I have been living, breathing, moving, and also losing myself as it were, for the last fortnight. Tell me, then, that you are happy, dearest Clara: and that assurance, coming from your lips, will enhance—Oh! unspeakably enhance—the joy which I myself now feel. Yes—and I shall be the more happy, too, if it be possible, because such assurance will convince me that *you*, my dearest sister have not experienced the blighting, withering influence of that atmosphere of fashion in which you have been moving.”

“What mean you, Louisa?” asked Clara, gazing upon her sister with so singular an expression that had the young maiden been more experienced in the world’s ways, and more deeply read in the science of the human heart, she would immediately have felt uneasy—perhaps dismay—by that look which Clara fixed upon her.

“I mean,” responded the artless, innocent, unsuspecting girl, “that Lady Ernestina Dysart drew ere now such a shocking picture of fashionable life, that she made me shudder.”

“Ah! what did she tell you?” inquired Clara.

“Oh! it was indeed very shocking,” answered Louisa, “and filled me with a sudden aversion for what is called the fashionable world. Lady Ernestina spoke to me of a certain celebrated beauty—I forget her name at this moment——”

“Try and remember,” said Clara, throwing her arms in such a way round Louisa’s neck that she drew the young virgin’s beauteous head down upon her own fine bust.

“Oh! I recollect now,” cried Louisa: “it was Venetia Trelawney.”

“Ah!” said Clara. “And what did Lady Ernestina tell you about her?”

“That she was as depraved as she was beautiful,” replied Louisa, whose cheek still remained pillowed against Clara’s bosom. “But doubtless you are acquainted with everything regarding this Venetia, since her story appears to be the topic of the fashionable world. Only conceive such dreadful depravity as to marry a young, handsome, and clever man and immediately after the honeymoon lend a willing ear to the improper overtures of that wicked, wicked man the Prince Regent! O Clara, if you ever meet this Venetia—or Lady Sackville, as I believe she is now called—I do sincerely hope you will never speak to her. It positively makes my cheeks glow with indignation and also with shame, when I think that the entire sex to some extent shares in the infamy of such creatures. Ah! and *your* cheeks glow also, my beloved Clara,” exclaimed the beauteous girl, suddenly raising her head and observing the deep carnation which overspread her sister’s countenance. “Oh! I was well aware that your noble heart would feel as indignant and also as humiliated as I, to think that the name of Woman should be disgraced by such a shameless profligate as that Venetia.”

“Let us talk no more of this?” said Clara the deep carnation hue suddenly sweeping away from her cheeks and leaving them very pale. “Yes—yes—the atmosphere of London is indeed unfitted for a flower of innocence and purity such as thou—and therefore must we part soon, dear sister, and you must lose no time in returning to Canterbury. Sir Douglas Huntingdon’s carriage will take you to Blackheath or Dartford, where you can

obtain a post-chaise and as it is now but two o'clock, you will reach Conterbury to-night ere it be very late."

"You seem, dear Clara, as if you wished to hurry me suddenly away?" said Louisa, the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"No—do not think me unkind, my sweet sister," returned Clara: "but I feel that London is not fitted for you—Oh! no, it is not fitted for *you*—and God in his mercy forbid that it ever should be," added Clara, with a strong emphasis.

"Well, dear sister," observed the younger girl, as she wiped away her tears, "I will do as you desire. But recollect that you have not as yet told me one word relative to yourself: and you ere now led me to believe that you had many things to tell me—yes, even secrets, which you had not chosen to commit to paper, but for which you awaited the opportunity of our meeting."

"Oh! I have nothing to tell you of such great importance as you seem to imagine," said Clara, with a smile, which did not however appear to take its inspiration from the full glow of a heart's unalloyed happiness. "You know that fond, loving, and affectionate sisters such as we are, always have a hundred little trifles and sweet nothings to tell each other, and which they treasure up for the day of meeting—"

"Then you have really nothing of importance to tell me?" said Louisa, with a tone and look of disappointment. "I thought you were perhaps going to reveal to me some matters indicative of your own complete and consummate happiness."

"No—that is to say I mean yes," ejaculated Clara, somewhat falteringly: then in a hurried tone, she added, "But I have already told you, by the bye, in my letters, that my dear kind friends, the Beckfords, have adopted me as their daughter, and intend to leave me all their fortune."

"Yes—you have already told me this," said Louisa; "and I have congratulated you in return: for of course you are well aware, Clara, that your happiness is as dear to me as my own—or even dearer: for I would endure anything sooner than be compelled to hear that you were unhappy."

"Dear Louisa—dear, dear girl," cried Clara, embracing her fervidly and fondly; "and be assured—Oh! be assured, that I entertain precisely the same feeling for you! But we must now part. Louisa—we must indeed: for it is time that you should return homeward; I am also compelled to

leave town again immediately to rejoin Mr. and Mrs. Beckford—otherwise I would accompany you part of the distance. But I repeat, Sir Douglas Huntingdon will escort you in his carriage as far as Blackheath—or perhaps Dartford—where he will see you safe in a post-chaise."

The sisters now separated with many reiterated embraces, and also with many tears: and once more was Louisa consigned the care of Sir Douglas Huntingdon. We need only add that the Baronet fulfilled his mission with delicacy and fidelity. He escorted her to Dartford, where she procured a post-chaise for her accommodation: and on parting from the lovely girl he experienced a sensation of ineffable joy to think that he had never once regarded her otherwise than with the utmost respect. 'Tis said that the lion crouches at the feet of a spotless maiden: and assuredly the gay libertine—the lion of human society—acknowledged the power of virtue and the empire of innocence on the present occasion!

Louisa reached home between ten and eleven o'clock at night, without experiencing any further adventure worthy recording: but it was far otherwise with Sir Douglas Huntingdon, as will appear in the following chapter,

CHAPTER LXXIX.

SHOOTER'S HILL.

Having acquitted himself thus honourably of the duty confided to him, the Baronet remained to dine at the principal hotel at Dartford; and as his horses had done good service during the day, they required ample leisure for bait and rest. He did not therefore hurry himself as to the hour of departure; and moreover, he fell in with agreeable company in the coffee-room of the tavern. For there had been a steeple-chase in the neighbourhood in the morning; and several sporting characters who had taken part in the barbarian "amusement," were now winding up the day's diversions with a good dinner and a jovial glass at the hotel. The Baronet, who liked such company and loved his bottle also, was therefore induced to remain with the convivialists until a somewhat late hour: indeed, it was considerably past ten o'clock when he ordered his carriage to be got ready—and another half-hour elapsed ere he had finished his wine, paid his bill, and set out on the journey homeward.

The footman who was in attendance on the vehicle sat next the coachman on the box; and as the night was very dark, the carriage-lamps had been lighted. But a dense mist, arising from the Thames, was borne by a sluggish northerly breeze over the southern bank of the river, enveloping the main road which the equipage was pursuing. The lamps accordingly shone as dimly as if through the dullest ground-glass; and the feeble glimmering thus thrown forth, was barely sufficient to enable the coachman to avoid the hedges, banks, ditches, or fences which by turns skirted the road.

The carriage accordingly proceeded at a leisurely pace; and Sir Douglas sank into a sound sleep under the influence of the liquor he had imbibed at Dartford. It was close upon midnight when the equipage began the long, tedious, and gloomy ascent of Shooter's Hill—that spot which, until a very recent period, was so memorable for the exploits of highwaymen. Still the Baronet dozed on upon the comfortable cushions of the carriage: but all in a moment he was startled from his sleep by the abrupt stoppage of the vehicle followed by the instantaneous plunging of the horses, together with several rough voices speaking menacingly.

Letting down the window, the Baronet became aware that his carriage was attacked by robbers: and having no weapons of any kind with him, he was unable to offer the slightest resistance. Besides which, the night was of such impenetrable gloom that he could literally see nothing of what was going on: but the voices which he heard enabled him to comprehend in a moment that his servants were overpowered, and that the ruffians were menacing them with death if they dared make any farther noise.

Thus far all that had happened since the Baronet was startled from his nap, was the work of a few seconds: and putting forth his hand, he was about to open the door when a couple of fellows came up to the windows. One of them immediately seized the carriage lamp on that side, and thrust it into the vehicle, turning it in such a way that its light fell upon the Baronet's countenance.

"He's a good-natured looking feller," said one in a gruff voice; "and so I suppose he'll stand summut handsome."

"To be sure he will, Bob," answered the other ruffian. "Now, sir," he continued, addressing himself to Sir Douglas, "your watch, your rings, your diamond breast-pin, and as a matter of course, your

purse! If not by fair means, we will have them by foul;"—and he placed a double-barrelled pistol so close to the Baronet's forehead as to cause him to tremble in spite of himself.

"Now, then, be quick, you sir," said the other ruffian, who had been addressed as Bob. "Don't frighten the gentleman out of his senses, Buttoner."

"Well, I don't want to, if so be he'll only make haste," observed the individual thus addressed, as he withdrew the pistol from the close vicinage of the Baronet's countenance.

Sir Douglas, perceiving that resistance was vain, nevertheless hoped that if he could only keep the villains, in parley, succour might arrive.

"Now, my good fellows," he accordingly said, surveying their countenances by the dim light of the carriage-lamp, and observing that one was a villainous looking man with a black patch over the eye, and that the other, who was called the Buttoner, was a jovial, well-favoured person,—"now my good fellows, I am quite ready to surrender up everything I have about me, if you like: but as I value my watch and my rings, I will pay you a fairer price for their ransom than you will get for them if you take them from me."

"Well, let's first look at the purse," said Bob—the fellow with the black patch over his eye, and who was no other than the Durrynacker to whom the reader was introduced at Bencull's dark crib.

The Baronet accordingly drew forth his purse which was found to contain something more than twelve guineas.

"Well, this here ain't no great shakes," cried the Buttoner. "I say, Ben," he exclaimed, raising his voice and turning his head away from the window, "the gentleman proposes a compromise for the yack, the fawneys, and so on."*

"Well, let it be so," said a hoarse thick voice in reply: and this indeed was none other than Mr. Bencull speaking, and who was mounting guard on the box over the coachman and footman.

"Very good," said the Buttoner. "Now, sir, please to step down:—and thus speaking, he opened the door of the carriage and lowered the steps.

"But where am I to go?" demanded the Baronet.

"Never do you mind," answered the Buttoner: "come along with us—that's all."

"Oh! if it be necessary to go any dis-

* Yack, watch—fawneys, rings.

tance, I would sooner give up my personal property at once," said the Baronet, who had thus involved himself in a dilemma which he little anticipated when proposing the compromise: "or else, can I not write you a cheque upon my banker on a leaf torn out of my pocket-book."

"No, no, sir—we don't do business in that way," responded the Buttoner, sharply. "You was the first to propose the compromise; and therefore we'll stick to it. Now then, how is it to be?" he demanded, again appealing to his confederate on the box.

"Oh! let your young woman manage it," replied Bencull.

"Be it so," said the Buttoner; then addressing himself in hasty and imperious terms to the Baronet, he continued, "Now, sir, you will give your servants orders to pay a hundred guineas to the bearer of a letter from you to that effect to-morrow morning; and you will tell them that if so be the young woman doesn't come back with the money by one o'clock to-morrow afternoon, we shall take it for granted that there's been foul play and that she's been took into custody: so that without more ado we shall draw a knife across your throat—do you understand, sir?"

"Yes—yes—perfectly well," replied the Baronet, uncommonly annoyed at the turn the adventure was taking, and inwardly cursing himself for not having surrendered up his jewellery without the suggestion of a compromise. "But you surely don't intend to hold me as a hostage until to-morrow afternoon?" he said, in a tone that betrayed his vexation.

"By jingo, but we do though!" exclaimed the Buttoner. "So no more palaver—but give your orders to your servants, and let the carriage depart."

"Well, since there is no help for it, be it as you say," observed the Baronet, with a philosophical resignation to an adventure which after all threatened to be more inconvenient than perilous: then addressing himself to the footman, he said "James you have heard what has taken place, and you will tell the housekeeper to pay the hundred guineas to any person who shall present a letter from me to-morrow morning to that effect. You will likewise tell Mrs. Baines that the person presenting such letters is to receive no molestation nor hindrance."

The footman promised a faithful attention to his master's orders: whereupon Bencull relieved that lacquey and the coachman from the terrors of his presence on the box and the imminence of his

pistols—and the instant he alighted the carriage drove rapidly away.

The whole of this scene did not occupy above five minutes, the colloquy which has taken us so long to record having passed with all the haste and hurry of the accompanying excitement.

And now, while the carriage was proceeding on its course, with the coachman and lacquey congratulating themselves on their escape, the Baronet was seized upon by the three ruffians and hurried into the thicket skirting that side of the road which was farthest from the Thames. Through the deep impenetrable darkness did the robbers conduct their captive, to whom it was evident by the rapid and unhesitating pace at which they advanced, that they were perfectly familiar with the locality. Such indeed was the case: for they were pursuing a beaten pathway through the wood, and in which they were enabled to keep with precision, inasmuch as the sinking of their feet on the damp ground on either side at once made them aware when there was the slightest divergence from that well-trodden path.

For upwards of a quarter of an hour did they thus proceed at a rapid rate. No violence was offered to the Baronet: but a firm grasp was kept upon him, in order to prevent his escape. Scarcely a word was spoken as they thus proceeded through that night of pitchy gloom; and at the expiration of the interval just named, a dim light was observed twinkling a little ahead. In two or three minutes the party halted suddenly at the door of what appeared to be a cottage, or hut, and whence the light had emanated.

The door was opened by another ill-looking rascal, who, we may as well observe at once, was the Mushroom Faker—another of the delectable company whose acquaintance our readers have made at Jacob's Island.

The Baronet was now introduced into a rude and dilapidated room, furnished with one or two benches and a couple of tables made of the roughest materials. The entire aspect of the place was of the most wretched and cheerless description. On one table stood a bottle, a glass, a plate, and a huge knife with a buck-horn handle: for the Mushroom Faker had only just concluded his supper at the moment when his companions arrived with their captive.

"Sit down, sir," said the Buttoner, "and make yourself at home. I suppose there's some kind of lish here," he continued, taking up the bottle and holding it against the flame of a tallow candle with

a long flaring wick. "Yes, to be sure there is:"—and filling the glass with brandy he tossed the dram down his throat. "Now, sir, pray help yourself to this here lush; and I can promise you'll find it ezcellent. In fact you must make yourself as comfortable as you can, while I go and see what my young woman can do eowards accommodating you for the night.

The Baronet made no reply, but threw a look of bitter annoyance round the room, and of a disgust upon the Buttoner, then seating himself on a rough stool at the clumsy table, he once more endeavoured to soothe his annoyance and resign himself to the temporary inconveniences of this position,

The Buttoner opened a small door and ascended a narrow staircase, which creaked and groaned beneath his heavy tread—while Bencull, Bob the Durrynacker, and the Mushroom Faker sat down at the second table and began drinking as fast and furiously as if they had never tasted strong waters before in their lives. It was notwithstanding pretty evident that there was no lack of the alcoholic fluid in the hut, as indeed the numerous bottles which appeared on the shelves of an open cupboard satisfactorily proved.

In a few minutes the Buttoner came down-stairs again; and presenting a sheet of paper, writing materials, and sealing wax to the Baronet, he said, "Now, sir, you'll please to draw up at once that there letter which is to be delivered to your housekeeper—Mrs. Baines, I think you called her cos why, my young woman will get up precious early in the morning, so as to be at your house in town, wherever it is, by eight or nine o'clock."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately proceeded to pen the requisite instructions for the payment of the hundred guineas to the bearer; and having affixed his signature to the letter, he was about to seal it when the Buttoner leant over his shoulder, observing in a coarse tone of familiarity. "Beg pardon, sir—but I must see what you have wrote, if you please."

"By all means," observed the Baronet, scarcely attempting to conceal his disgust. "But if you did not mean me to close the letter, why did you bring the sealing-wax."

"I fancied you would rayther seal it," was the reply; "so that when delivered at your door to-morrow morning, it won't be read by no one but her as it is addressed to. But all this isn't no reason why I shouldn't see aforehand what the letter

really contains. Howsunever, it's all right—and so now you can seal it."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon accordingly secured the letter: and having duly addressed it to Mrs. Baines, his housekeeper in London, he gave it into the hands of the Buttoner. This individual once more hurried up the narrow rickety staircase, at the top of which was a bedroom—if a place with a quantity of dirty flock scattered upon the floor, a wretched coverlid, a rudely constructed table, a chipped bason, and a cracked ewer, deserves such an appellation.

In this wretched apartment Nell Gibson was seated. A bottle of spirits and a glass stood upon the table; and as the light of the solitary candle played flickeringly upon her countenance, it showed that her features were slightly flushed with drinking. Her apparel was in striking contrast with the miserable aspect of the place. She wore gold ear-rings: a silk boddice, fitting close to her shape, displayed the luxuriant proportions of her figure;—her arms were bare to the shoulder—and the short skirts of her dress revealed her well-formed ankles up to the swell of the leg. A handsome bonnet and scarf lay upon the bench where she was seated; and when the Buttoner re-appeared this second time in the chamber, she was counting a few guineas which she had taken from a new silk purse.

We have already informed our readers that there had been a grand steeple-chase in the neighbourhood that morning; and great numbers of persons had been attracted to the vicinage of Shooter's Hill, not only from the adjacent towns of Dartford, Woolwich, and Greenwich, but also from the metropolis. To take advantage of this opportunity of displaying their particular genius and exercising their craft, Bencull, the Durrynacker, the Buttoner and Nell Gibson had appeared upon the scene; while the Hangman, Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling had likewise paid a visit to the same neighbourhood and for the same purpose. Of course the two parties had thus met in pursuance of previous arrangement: but we shall not pause to describe the various ways in which all these worthies, male and female turned the proceedings of the day and the presence of a large concourse of people, to their own special advantage. Suffice it to say that they managed to reap a very tolerable harvest; and when evening came the two parties took a very friendly leave of each other. On the one hand, Daniel Coffin, Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling

repaired to a small lonely but convenient ale-house at a short distance amongst the fields, to take up their quarters till morning: while, on the other hand, Bencull, the Buttoner, the Durrynacker, and Nell Gibson had already arranged to pass the night at the rude hut in the immediate vicinage of Shooter's Hill.

Now the hut belonged to no less a personage than the Mushroom-Faker. The reader will scarcely require to be told that it was a very convenient haunt for such personages as those just named; and accordingly, when business was slack at Jacob's Island, they often sought the rude hut for the purpose of seeing what they could pick up by nights on Shooter's Hill. It was also a retreat for any member of the fraternity whom circumstances compelled to "keep out of the way" for a while;—and suspicion was averted from the place by the maintenance of an air of the most abject poverty. The gamekeepers of the district fancied that it was occupied only by a poor inoffensive umbrella-mender, who was frequently absent on long journeys: whereas, in reality it was the scene of many crimes and the hiding-place of many criminals.

We need only add in explanation of present incidents, that Bencull, the Durrynacker, and the Buttoner, flushed with the success of their proceedings amongst the crowds collected for this steeple-chase in the morning, had resolved not to allow the night to pass without "trying their luck," on Shooter's Hill. Hence the stoppage of the Baronet's carriage and the circumstances which led to his introduction to the hut.

We stated that upon ascending the stairs a second time, the Buttoner found Nell Gibson counting her money: and as he tossed her the letter which he had just received from the Baronet down-stairs, he said, "Here, gal, is the dokiment that will produce a hundred guineas to-morrow morning."

"So much the better," observed the young woman, with a smile of satisfaction "this is something like a night's adventure. Let me see—there's five of us—that will be twenty guineas apiece, because although you and me are now as good as one, yet we go shares as two."

"Oh! to be sure," said the Buttoner; "that's understood! You'll have to start off precious early in the morning, Nell, so as to deliver that letter by eight or nine o'clock, and make sure of the money. Not that it matters much, so far as the swell cove his self is concerned: for we don't

mean to part with him quite so easy. In fact," added the Buttoner, lowering his voice to a whisper, "we don't mean to part with him at all."

"Then what *do* you mean?" asked Nell, in her usually quiet way, as if it were impossible for her to be surprised, started, or alarmed by any announcement that could be made or any plan that could be revealed.

"Why, the swell cove has got such a handsome yack and chain, such beautiful fawneys, and such a sweet breastpin—besides which, his toggery is so precious good—that it would raly be a sin to let such wallyables slip through our fingers. And therefore," added the Buttoner, in a still lower whisper and with an ominous look, "we mean to put him wery comfortably out of the way. Besides, dead men tell no tales—and since he has seen all our precious faces and would have no trouble in recognising us again, it's much better to give him his gruel."

"Who is he?" asked Nell Gibson. "Do you know his name? Because if he happens to be any great person, there would be such a precious piece of work that no stone would be left unturned till his fate was discovered."

"To be sure I know who he is," returned the Buttoner. "You don't think I should have been fool enough to let him seal up that there letter afore I read it through? Bût I say, Nell, you don't object to having this swell cove made away with—do ye?"

"Not I indeed," returned this young woman who beneath a handsome exterior concealed the implacable and remorseless spirit of a fiend. "And even supposing I did object, I know very well that if Bencull has once made up his mind, neither heaven nor earth could move him to the contrary."

"Well, he has then, I can tell you," returned the Buttoner: "for although not a word has passed our lips on the subject, yet me and him and the Durrynacker and Mushroom Faker, have settled the pint with our looks."

"I suppose you will wait till I come back to-morrow to say whether I have got the money or not?" observed Nell Gibson.

"There's no use waiting at all," answered the Buttoner. "Whether he's alive or dead at eight o'clock to-morrow morning, won't make no difference in your getting the money: and as for sticking a knife in a feller in cold blood during the day-time I raly couldn't do it. It's all

wery well at night, when one has had plenty of lush to make one pluck——"

"Well, you know best—and it's quite the same to me," interrupted Nell Gibson with a yawn. But after all you havn't told me what his name is," she observed carelessly as she turned the letter over and over in her hand.

"*Douglas Huntingdon* the signature is," answered the Buttoner. "But what's the matter, Nell?" he demanded, as she suddenly dropped the letter on the floor.

"Nothing. Why do you ask?" she inquired, stooping down to pick up the letter: then having done so, she looked up in the Buttoner's face, saying, "Why did you ask me that question, I repeat?"

"Because I thought you started and looked queer all of a sudden," was the response.

"Not I indeed," she observed in an off-handed manner, as she steadily met this keen searching gaze which the Buttoner fixed upon her for a few moments. "Do you think he suspects he is in any danger?" she asked: "because if so, it would be well to lull him into security."

"That's just what I want," responded the Buttoner. "I shouldn't like for us all to have to set upon him while he's awake, and so massacre him as one may say. I had much rather that he would lie down and go to sleep—and then we could do his business all quiet and comfortable, without leaving no tell-tale stains about the place. In fact, I told him just now that I would come up-stairs and see what accommodation my young woman could make for him."

"Well, why don't you go and tell him he can have a bedroom, such as it is?" said Nell Gibson. "Or I tell you what," she added, a thought suddenly appearing to strike her, "if you like I'll go down stairs and invite him to come up here."

"Well, do so if you fancy you'll succeed," replied the Buttoner. "There's no harm in trying it on."

"No harm at all," echoed Nell Gibson: and with this observation she descended to the room below, the Buttoner remaining up-stairs.

The moment she made her appearance in the lower apartment, she threw a rapid look of intelligence upon Bencull, the Durrynacker, and the Mushroom Faker, who were boozing at one table, while she advanced towards the Baronet who was still seated at the other. The three villains understood by this look that she had some project in hand; and they therefore affected to take no particular notice

of her. This was precisely what she wanted: her object was to divert their attention or at all events cause them to look aside for a moment while she had an opportunity of making a sign of intelligence to the Baronet. Indeed had she not by such a sign enjoined him to hold his peace, an exclamation of astonishment would have burst from his lips: for Nell Gibson was indeed no stranger to him—and he had instantaneously recognised her!

Yes—her form was fuller and grosser, her looks were bolder, and her mien was more brazen than when he saw her last: nevertheless, he failed not to recognise in an instant that countenance which he had once admired, and that form whose virgin charms had been despoiled by him!

The ejaculation, then, of amazement which was about to burst forth, died upon his lips as he caught that signal which she made him: and instantly perceiving by her manner that she had in view some purpose which she wished to conceal from the ruffians at the other end of the room, he suddenly assumed an air of perfect composure, so as not to betray that any secret intelligence existed between them.

"You are sure, sir," she said holding up the letter, "that this document will meet with proper attention to-morrow morning?"

"I am certainly of it," he replied. "The men who brought me hither, overheard the instructions which I gave to my servants ere they departed with the carriage——"

But while Sir Douglas Huntingdon was thus speaking, Nell Gibson said in a low rapid whisper, "*Fly hence, I conjure you?*"

Startling as those words were, inasmuch as they revealed to him in a moment all the dangers of his position, he nevertheless had the presence of mind to continue speaking the sentence—which we have recorded;—and thus his voice drowned the whispered accents of the female.

"Well, sir," she said aloud, as if in answer to the observation which he had made,—"I do hope that it will not be a wild-goose chase that I shall have to-morrow morning. And now, sir, as you have got to stay here all night, I am sent to propose that you walk upstairs and lie down."

But as she thus spoke, she gave a slight and just perceptible shake of the head, as much as to tell him *not* to accept her offer.

"Thank you, young woman," he said

aloud, with a look which showed that he not only experienced a full sense of the danger of which he had made him aware, but likewise the deepest gratitude towards herself,—“than you, young woman, I would rather not. Presently when I feel tired—I will avail myself of the offer.”

And while Sir Douglas was thus speaking, in such a manner as perfectly to cover Nell's whispered accents, she breathed in the lowest tone the following words;—*“The door is not fastened—watch your opportunity—seize that knife—and escape!”*—then, immediately afterwards, she said aloud, and in a calm placid voice “Would you like anything to eat sir? We have provisions in the place, and because you are a prisoner for a few hours, there's no reason why you should be starved.”

“No, I thank you—I require nothing,” responded the Baronet: and as he threw a rapid, furtive, sidelong glance towards the three men, at the other end of the room, he saw in the sinister signs they were making together, a horrible confirmation of the dire alarms which Nell Gibson had excited in his breast.

“I wish you good night, sir,” she said: and darting upon him another look of intelligence, she turned away.

Ascending the staircase to the chamber above, she re-appeared in the presence of the Buttoner, who was paying his respect to the brandy-bottle there.

“Well gal—I see it's no use?” he observed. “The swell cove wouldn't be enticed up here—eh?”

“But he doesn't suspect anything wrong,” returned the young woman with the most perfect composure of countenance. “It is quite clear he fancies himself safe enough from danger, and that he will be let loose again to-morrow when I come back with the money.”

She then sat down by the side of the Buttoner, with an air as composed and self-possessed as if she had betrayed nothing of the contemplated horrors.

In the meantime Sir Douglas Huntingdon had remained sitting at the table in the apartment below. Cold—ice-cold was the tremor that seized upon him as he reflected on the appalling perils, by which he was surrounded. Though no coward, he could not help shrinking in dismay from the chasm on the brink of which he appeared to stand. As he glanced furtively around upon the three men who were boozing at the other table, he fancied that murder was written upon their very countenances. Averting his eyes in dread horror, he cast them down upon the floor:

and, behold! they settled on stains which instantaneously struck him to be those of blood. His looks were startled away from that hideous point of view and as they swept in frightened rapidity around, they caught *other* stains upon the wooden wall which likewise appeared to be the marks of blood!

Shuddering to the very confines of his being, the Baronet felt as if he were indeed looking Death face to face. The pitch darkness of the night that hung like a sable pall against the cottage-window—the awful stillness that prevailed around—the utter loneliness of that hut—the evil reputation of the neighbourhood—the deep solemn hour of midnight—and then those villanous countenances which seemed more sinister and diabolical still as the faint flickering light played upon them, all these influences and circumstances combined to fill his soul with a fearful consternation and a horrible dismay!

Scarcely a quarter of an hour had elapsed since he had refused in disgust the dram of brandy which the Buttoner had offered to him; but now he hastened to pour it out and greedily swallow it to revive his drooping courage. In a moment the burning fluid appeared to flash like lightning through his veins: it was the spark to a whole train of excitement which had been subdued for a few minutes by the weight of an overwhelming consternation.

Yes—all was now haste in his thoughts—hurry in his ideas—a dizzy whirl in his brain. The red right arm of murder seemed to be extended over him; the gleaming blade appeared to be ready to plunge down into his heart;—and his eyes swept wildly around to assure himself that ruffians were not already standing behind him, or creeping stealthily towards him. No—they were still seated at the table, drinking and talking. The man Bencull had thrown off his coat and appeared in his shirt-sleeves. This in reality was because the night was close, the room was hot, and much liquor had made him feverish; but to the excited imagination of Sir Douglas Huntingdon it appeared as if the fellow were preparing himself to do the work of murder, as a butcher prepares for the slaughter of an ox,—and now wrought up to a pitch of desperation, the Baronet snatched up the knife—made but one bound from his seat to the door—lifted the latch—and darted forth into the pitchy blackness of the night.

With ejaculations of amazement and fury Bencull, the Durrynaeker, and the Mushroom Faker rushed after the fugi-

tive: and these cries of rage reaching the chamber above, told Nell Gibson that the Baronet had escaped, and startled the Buttoner with the conviction that something was wrong. Rushing down the stairs, he found the lower room empty and the door wide open: and he was about to dart forth and join in the pursuit, when an idea that flashed to his brain, struck him as it were with the sudden blow of a hammer, and made him stop short in the midst of his furious excitement, as a drunken man is sobered all in a moment by some fearful announcement.

CHAPTER LXXX.

THE FAIR STRANGER.

The thought which thus suddenly arrested the steps of the Buttoner and transfixed him to the spot, was that Nell Gibson had betrayed the murderous project to the Baronet.

Our readers will remember a certain conversation which took place a fortnight previously to the present date of our story, between Bencull and the Hangman relative to the employment of Nell Gibson to lead Larry Sampson into a trap. It will likewise be borne in mind that "to make sure doubly sure," in a scheme of so dangerous and delicate a character, they had resolved to plant the Buttoner as a spy upon Nell Gibson's action. Being well provided with cash and good clothes, the Buttoner had found these proofs of prosperity to be immediate passports to the favour of Miss Gibson; and he accordingly took up his abode with her at Mrs. Young's delectable establishment in Bermondsey. He and Nell were therefore living as husband and wife together; and we have already shown how it was that they happened to be at the hut near Shooter's Hill on the night of which we are writing.

Now, be it observed that the Buttoner was expressly employed and also bribed by Bencull and the Hangman to watch Nell Gibson's conduct. This circumstance was alone sufficient to render him far more susceptible of misgiving than he otherwise would have been, and more liable to entertain suspicion at the slightest appearance of anything mysterious or sinister. Thus when he suddenly recollected how Nell Gibson had started, and how strange she had looked for a moment when he mentioned the Baronet's name to her, he was

struck by the idea that she had played the traitress.

Instead, therefore, of rushing out in pursuit of the fugitive, the Buttoner turned back from the threshold of the hut, and faced Nell Gibson just as she reached the bottom of the stairs down which she had followed him.

"You see this swell cove has escaped," he said, fixing his eyes upon her with a keenness that appeared to penetrate her through and through.

"I see it indeed," she answered, encountering his gaze with an unwavering steadiness, although upon her cheek there seemed to be a slight, slight changing of colour, and on the lips the least, least twitching of nervousness.

"What did you say to him just now, Nell?" inquired the Buttoner, scarcely knowing what to think, but at all events too uncertain as to her manner to feel justified in accusing her point blank on the spot.

"I merely asked him whether he was sure that the money would be paid to-morrow morning" replied Nell, perceiving that she was suspected, but still maintaining an air of perfect self-possession; "and when he had assured me that there would be no mistake on that head," she continued, "I asked him whether he chose to lie down to rest or to partake of any refreshment."

"And that was all that took place?" said the Buttoner, still keeping his eyes steadily fixed upon her.

"That was all," she answered, the colour neither coming nor going now upon her cheeks, nor her lip betraying even the slightest uneasiness. "But whatever mischief may follow from this escape," she observed in a tone of vexation mingled with reproach, "you and the others have only got yourselves to thank for it. You should have made the door fast, and not left the bird an opportunity to fly out of his cage."

"By jingo! what you say is true enough, Nell," exclaimed the Buttoner, feeling how justly merited was the remonstrance: then advancing to the door, which still stood wide open, he listened with suspended breath while with straining eyes he endeavoured to penetrate the pitchy blackness of the night.

"Well, can you hear anything?" asked the young woman, as he turned back again from the door, leaving it however wide open.

"Nothing—not even the rustling of the branches," he replied, with a terrible

imprecation. "Do you know, Nell, this is a very serious business and may end cursed-badly? Like infernal fools that we were, we once or twice let slip each other's names, and so, what with knowing these, and being able to describe our precious faces, this swell cove if he makes good his escape, will be able to give such information against us as shall make London too hot to hold us. Then, my eyes! won't Larry indeed have something to be down upon us for!"

"How provoking," ejaculated Nell Gibson; "and just at the time, too, that I was getting Larry Sampson into such a nice state of credulity, that a few days more would entice him into the trap as safe and sure as possible!"

"Yes—it is deucedly provoking," growled the Buttoner: and once more he went to the threshold and listened attentively. "There's not a sound, not even the waving of the trees," and again turning away from the door, he tossed off a bumper of brandy.

"What must we do?" inquired Nell, appearing to be very uneasy, although in her heart she knew full well that the Baronet would not be guilty of such black ingratitude as to give any information to the authorities calculated to compromise herself.

"What must we do?" echoed her paramour; "why, if our pals come back without the swell cove, we must get away from her as quick as ever we can. Who knows but what he may cut across to Greenwich and come back at once with a whole posse of constables? Or perhaps he may meet some travellers on the road—"

"Aye, truly!" cried Nell, affecting to be very seriously alarmed. "Let us go away at once. There's no use in staying here to be taken. Bencull and the others will know very well how to shift for themselves. Suppose we go down to the *Jolly Waggoner*, where Daniel Coffin and his party are."

"Well, go up-stairs and put on your toggery," interrupted the Buttoner, really beginning to think that it was high time to make themselves scarce.

"Nell Gibson accordingly tripped up to the room above: but scarcely had she adjusted her bonnet and thrown her flaunting scarf over her previously much exposed shoulders and bosom, when she heard the sounds of voices below—and recognising Bencull's hoarse tones, she hastened down-stairs again, sick at heart with the apprehension that Sir Douglas had been retaken.

Bencull, Bob the Durrynacker, and the Mushroom Faker had indeed returned, as Nell had just expected: but instead of being accompanied by the Baronet, the first mentioned of the three ruffians bore in his arms the inanimate form of a beautiful girl, while one of the others carried in his hand a bundle tied up in a shawl.

"What in the devil's name does this mean?" demanded the Buttoner, surveying his comrades with surprise and the senseless damsel with a look of admiration.

"Here's a present for Nell," said Bencull, with a salacious leer as he looked down upon the still and placid countenance of his fair burthen. "Nell will break her in, in the usual style——"

"Aye, that will I!" exclaimed the young woman, who was not only immensely relieved at finding her fears unfounded with regard to the recapture of the Baronet, but who was also much struck with the sweet, touching, and interesting beauty of the fair stranger whose charms she already resolved upon turning into gold. "Mrs. Gale will give twenty gumeas for this young creature: and I daresay the Marquis of Leveson, who is Mrs. Gale's best patron, will give her at least five times as much. But come—bring her upstairs and lay her down on the bed: for this swoon is so deep that it may be dangerous."

Bencull accordingly bore the beautiful girl in his arms to the chamber above; while Nell Gibson followed with the bundle which she took from the Mushroom Faker who was carrying it. The fair stranger was deposited softly and gently upon the heap of flock; and Nell Gibson, stooping down, unfastened her bonnet, which was much crushed, so as to give her air. A luxuriant profusion of soft and fine flaxen tresses now flowed over the wretched coverlid, whereon reclined the damsel's beautiful head: and though all tint of vital colouring had fled from her countenance, leaving it marble pale, and her eyes were closed as if in death: so still were the long brown lashes that rested on her cheeks, yet was there an air of such Madonnalike sweetness and angelic beauty about this lovely girl, that only a heart so intensely selfish as that of Nell Gibson, or so brutally ferocious as that of Bencull, could have remained inaccessible to the soft stealing influence and silent magic of such charms.

The damsel was tall, slender, and of sylphid symmetry. Her apparel, though exceedingly plain, was very neat; and as she lay stretched upon that sordid couch,

her drapery, humble as it was, seemed to have settled itself in purely classic folds, developing the flowing outlines of the form which it concealed and displaying the exquisite shape of the beautifully modelled limbs.

It was not however in such an æsthetic light that Nell Gibson contemplated the sweetly reposing form of the inanimate maiden; but she did not fail to appreciate all the touching softness and all the tender interest that enveloped the fair stranger as with a halo; so that when she had removed the bonnet and beheld all that silken richness of the flaxen hair, setting off a countenance of virginal innocence—shoulders beautifully rounded and gently sloping—and bust whose nascent charms were proportioned like a Grecian statue,—the young woman threw upon Bencull a look of delight, as she whispered “This is indeed a prize that you have brought here!”

“Well, you may thank the night-coach for upsetting just at the brow of Shooter’s Hill,” returned Bencull.

“What on earth do you mean?” demanded Nell Gibson, surveying him with a look of astonishment at such a singular remark.

“I mean just this,” answered the man: “that as me and the two pals reached the hill in search of that feller Huntingdon, we heard a noise of voices calling out, horses plunging and all kind of confusion while light was dancing about on the spot that the noise came from. So we crept up to the place; and we soon found out what it was. The night-coach for Dover had upset: and there was a rare scene, if so be all that took place in the dark can be called a scene at all. But it wasn’t quiet in the dark neither; for the coachman and guard had got down the lamps and was moving about to see the extent of the mischief done. ‘*Here this sweet young gal,*’ says the guard, *which sat next to me just now: she’s pitched right on this bank, and is either stunned or dead:*’—and as he spoke he threw the light on her face and figure in such a manner that me and the two pals caught a full view of her, for she was lying within a couple of yards of the spot where we was hid in the shade. We saw quite enough of her to convince us that she was a sweet pretty creature; and the Mushroom Faker whispered in my ear ‘*My eyes! if Nell Gibson only had that young gal in her hands for a week or so.*’ These words was a hint; and without any more ado I took the young gal up in my arms the moment the guard turned

away to attend to a inside passenger. Finding that her heart beat, I carried her right clean away from the spot, no one seeing the dodge in the darkness and the confusion. The Mushroom Faker kicked against a bundle which he accordingly picked up and brought with him; and as it was quite close to the place where the young girl was lying, I suppose it is her’s.”

“Well, the occurrence is a fortunate one,” observed Nell Gibson: “for Mrs. Gale will pay handsomely for this young creature. She’s delicate looking but beautiful as an angel, though I say it who know so little about angels—and perhaps never shall know any more. But what about the Baronet?” she demanded abruptly.

“Oh! he’s a Baronet, is he?” exclaimed Bencull. “Yes—to be sure, I recollect there is a Baronet of the name of Huntingdon at the West End—I’ve heard of him afore: he’s a pale of the Prince’s. Well, I suppose he has got clean off: and precious awkward it is, too. I must go down stairs and see what our pals say about it. So I’ll leave you to take care of this young gal.”

With these words the ruffian quitted the chamber: and when the door had closed behind him, Nell Gibson took some water and sprinkled it upon the young damsel’s countenance. The effect was soon visible—and slowly did the fair being begin to recover: her bosom rose and fell with the long and painful undulations of returning consciousness;—and opening a pair of the finest azure eyes that ever reflected the pure soul’s light of innocence, she gazed up with a look of vacant inquiry into the countenance that was bending over her. Then, as her recollection gradually revived: and all the circumstances of the recent accident were recalled to her mind, she glanced around with an expression rather of gratitude than astonishment: for it naturally occurred to her that she was experiencing the hospitality of some humble dwelling near the scene of the coach accident.

“Are you injured?—do you feel hurt?” inquired Nell Gibson, in a tone so kind and reassuring that it precluded the springing up of any immediate alarm or suspicion in the maiden’s mind.

“No—I do not feel that I have sustained serious injury, beyond a severe shock, answered the beauteous stranger, in a voice of the most touching melody: and as the colour came back with the delicate tinge of the roseleaf to her cheeks, but with the deepest hue of that blushing

flower to her exquisitely chiselled lips,—and as these lips revealed teeth white as oriental pearls, and exhaled the balmiest breath—Nell Gibson could not help thinking that she had never seen a lovelier creature than this fair girl.

"You are welcome where you are, young lady," said Nell: "and if you can put up with such poor accommodation as I am able to afford, I shall be truly happy."

"My best thanks are due for your kindness," answered the damsel: and it was with a sort of ill-subdued shudder that she cast her eyes around that wretched, cheerless, poverty-stricken chamber. But I must pursue my journey this night—I must return to the coach, which will no doubt continue its way——"

"The coach is so much injured," interrupted Nell, "that it will not be able to go on till the morning: and therefore you must make up your mind to stay here. Is that your bundle, Miss?"

"Yes—I thank you," was the answer, as the fair stranger glanced towards the object thus indicated. "But indeed—oh! indeed," she cried, in accents that bespoke a painful and increasing agitation "I must even pursue my way on foot—for I have promised to be at Dover by a certain hour to-morrow:"—and as she thus spoke, she endeavoured to rise from the flock bed: but sinking back again with the weakness and exhaustion consequent upon her fall from the coach-top, she clasped her hands in a despairing manner—murmuring, "O God! what will he think?"

Then a faintness came over her—and she sank down again upon the wretched couch, deprived of consciousness.

* * *

Meantime, in the apartment down stairs, Bob the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker explained to the Buttoner the accident relative to the night-coach, and the manner in which the fair damsel had fallen into their hands.

"Well, I've no doubt, but what my young woman will turn her to precious good advantage," said the Buttoner. "But wouldn't it have been much better to go on looking after the swell cove, than to bother one's-self about young gals pitched from the top of stage-coaches?"

"This Huntingdon chap, you see, has slipped betwixt our fingers," said the Mushroom Faker; and to think of looking any longer for him in the midst of this dark night was about as wise as to hunt for a needle in a haystack."

"Then we must all bolt off at once,"

said the Buttoner: "or else the swell cove will p'r'aps come back with a posse of beaks at his heels."

"Now, then—who's giving way to idle fears like that there?—and where the deuce is the swell cove to get assistance or raise an alarm at this time of night?" demanded Bencull, who had just descended from the chamber above. "The circumstances of his knowing our precious names and having seen all our beautiful faces is the worst: cos why, it will make London too hot to hold us. Now then, I tell you what we will do," he continued, speaking with great rapidity. "There's no doubt this Baronet——"

"Baronet!" ejaculated the Buttoner. "How d'ye know he's a Baronet?"

"Why, your young woman says so," answered Bencull.

"Ah! Nell said so, did she?" observed the Buttoner, all his suspicions flaming up again, more vividly than ever, in his mind, but not deeming the present time a favourable opportunity to mention his misgivings, he said, "Well, go on, Bencull: what are we to do?—what do you advise?"

"Why, I should think," continued the landlord of the dark crib at Jacob's Island, "that the Baronet must have got down into the main road by this time: so that he is making for Dartford or else for Greenwich. Which ever it is, he *must* be overtook and done for, come what will. Now then, you and me, Buttoner, will cut right through the thicket and take the Dartford direction—while you two," he added, addressing himself to the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker, "set off towards Greenwich. This is what we ought to have done at first: but it's better late than never—and we're pretty sure to overtake him."

"I'll just run up and let Nell know what we are doing," said the Buttoner.

"Don't stay a moment then," observed Bencull.

The Buttoner hastened up-stairs and found Nell Gibson hanging over the fair stranger, just at the moment that the latter had sunk down again into a state of insensibility, as already described.

"I'm going off in pursuit of that swell cove, Nell," said the Buttoner, in a hurried manner and without suffering her to perceive that his suspicions were aroused again: "for Bencull says it must be done, and so we mean to dog him until we find him. You must stay here till we come back."

Nell Gibson dared not venture a word of remonstrance against this renewal of the

pursuit after Sir Douglas Huntingdon: and on the other hand she experienced in reality no fears for her safety in remaining at the hut, inasmuch as we have already said she was well convinced that the Baronet would adopt no extreme course calculated to compromise herself.

The Buttoner, having made her acquainted with the intended expedition, paused not to speak another word, but hastened down to rejoin his companions. They then all four issued from the hut leaving Nell Gibson alone with the fair stranger.

CHAPTER LXXXI.

"THE JOLLY WAGGONER."

FRESH PERILS.

We must now return to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who was destined this night to pass through so many strange and perilous adventures. At the moment he bounded forth from the hut in the manner already described, he knew full well that pursuit would be instantaneous. Accordingly, instead of rushing away strait a-head and plunging into the thicket in the direction of the road, he at once passed round to the back of the cottage and there posted himself, remaining as still and motionless as a statue. At the same time he heard his pursuers rushing forth from the door on the other side of the building; and as they at once made for the road, the Baronet had reason to congratulate himself on the success of his manoeuvre. Not for an instant did the ruffians suspect that he had remained so near: and not only were they thus thrown completely off the right scent, but they could hear nothing—not a foot-fall amongst the dried leaves, nor the snapping of a twig—to mark the course which the fugitive Baronet might have taken.

Having suffered several minutes to elapse, Sir Douglas Huntingdon stole away from the vicinity of the cottage: and securing about his person the knife which he had brought with him, he proceeded at random through the intense blackness of the night. The reader will therefore understand that Sir Douglas was now advancing in the very opposite direction from that which his pursuers had taken; and while they had become engaged in the adventure of the overturned coach, as already stated, the object of their search was speeding across the fields towards a light that glimmered in the distance.

Cheered by the appearance of this ray, which he hoped would prove the beacon of hospitality as well as the harbinger of safety for the rest of the night, Sir Douglas increased his pace: but, still, he was compelled to advance with considerable caution, lest in the deep darkness which enveloped him he should fall into some pit, pond, or ditch. In about ten minutes he reached a stile, over which he clambered: and he now found himself in what appeared to be a narrow lane, on the other side of which, exactly facing the stile, stood a small building from one of whose lower windows glimmered the light that had guided him thither. He advanced up to the door: and now through the darkness of the night he beheld an object hanging, darker than the darkness, over its head. For the moment an indescribable feeling of alarm thrilled coldly through his frame; for it struck him that it was a human corpse thus suspended overhead. But the next instant he perceived by its shape, and also by the creaking sound it sent forth, that it was nothing more nor less than the projecting sign of an inn, or rather ale-house.

Encouraged by this discovery in proportion as he had just previously been terrified, the Baronet felt assured of obtaining an asylum for the rest of the night; and on knocking at the door it was almost immediately opened by a stout, red-faced man, with a rubicund nose and a drunken leer, both alike indicating a love of strong liquour. There could consequently be no mistake that this was the landlord; and Sir Douglas at once requested accommodation for the night.

"Well, I don't exactly know how that can be," answered the Boniface, keeping the door only half open, with his own burly form filling up the interval—while the light from within streamed with a sort of Rembrandt effect upon the Baronet, whose personal appearance was thus plainly visible to the landlord.

"How do you mean you do not know whether you can accommodate me?" cried Sir Douglas. "Is not this a house of public entertainment?"

"To be sure it is, *The Jolly Waggoner* is well-knowned in these here parts: but there's been a steeple-chase in the neighbourhood to-day—and so, you see I have got as much company as I can well accommodate.

"But is there another inn or tavern near?" asked the Baronet, in a tone of deep vexation.

"No—that there isn't," answered the

landlord, still keeping fast in the doorway. But where do you come from?—and how is it you are out so late? You seem a stylish kind of gentleman, notwithstanding."

"The truth is," answered Sir Douglas, "I am a man of rank and fortune. My carriage has been robbed by a set of ruffians on Shooter's Hill: and I was dragged away to a hut close by. There I should have been murdered, were it not for secret intimation given me by a young woman, of her companions' diabolical intentions. Thanks to her, my life is saved. I escaped—and wandering through the darkness, caught a glimpse of the light shining from your window: Now, then, will you refuse me admission?—for depend upon it, the accommodation which I seek will be liberally recompensed. If you wish to know who I am, my name is Sir Douglas Huntingdon."

We must pause for an instant to acquaint our readers that every syllable of this explanation was overheard by the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling, who had established their quarters at the *Jolly Waggoner* for the night. They had not as yet retired to rest but had been carousing with the landlord until the moment the Baronet knocked at the front door. As he gave the above account of his adventures, the Hangman and his companions at once comprehended that it must have been Bercull's party who had waylaid the carriage: and they likewise understood that it was to the Mushroom Faker's hut the Baronet had been dragged. But no words can depict their astonishment, when they further gleaned from his explanations that it could have been none other than Nell Gibson who had given him the private information which induced him to escape. The Hangman and Sally Melmoth accordingly exchanged looks of ominous significance, as they both muttered the name of Nell Gibson; and Jack the Foundling seemed equally amazed and indignant at the evident treachery of that young woman.

Now the landlord of the *Jolly Waggoner* was neither more nor less than one of the members of Daniel Coffin's extensive brotherhood of desperadoes; and therefore as the Baronet revealed the details of his adventures, the fellow at once understood how he ought to act. But if he experienced any indecision on the point, it speedily vanished as the Hangman's voice reached his ears, in a gruff whisper from the fireplace where he was seated,—saying, "Let him in by all means."

The landlord coughed aloud in order to prevent that whisper reaching the Baronet and assuming an air of profound civility, he said, "Pray walk in, sir, I am sorry that a gentleman of your rank and consideration should have been so scurvily treated in this here neighbourhood."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon accordingly entered the place and as there was no passage of any kind, he at once found himself in what may be called the parlour or tap-room of that little alehouse. There were numerous Windsor chairs ranged round the walls—a huge deal table in the middle of the room—several spittoons upon the sanded floor—and a cheerful fire blazing in the grate. On the table were jugs of ale, a tray of pipes, and a paper of tobacco; and seated round the hearth were the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling.

Daniel Coffin was the first to make way for the Baronet; and so very polite and civil was he, that Sir Douglas failed to receive any evil impression from his particular sinister countenance. The landlord remarking "that it was very cold, and that his guest would no doubt like something warm," hastened into a little bar parlour opening from the end of the room, and speedily returned with a reeking tumbler of brandy-and-water.

"And so sir, you was unfortunate enough to get robbed, was you?" said the landlord, as he resumed his own seat in the chimney corner. "Only think," he continued, addressing himself to the Hangman "of the gentleman being compelled to fly for his life. But what a good young woman it must have been that gave him such a hint,"

"Yes," observed Daniel Coffin; "I heard the gentlemen telling you the story at the door a minute ago; and I thought to myself what a lucky thing it was he got off so nice. But I really tremble for the poor young woman, in case she should be suspected by her companions——"

"Ah! you may well say *that*," exclaimed the landlord, taking his cue from the Hangman's words. "The rascals that infest this here neighbourhood, are the most murderous, villainous cut-throats that ever was: and if they only once as much as suspected the young woman——"

"Oh! don't talk of it!" cried Sally Melmoth, pretending to be fearfully shocked; "the bare idea is enough to make one's blood run cold."

"Yes—it would indeed be very shocking," said the landlord shaking his head with awful solemnity, "if the whole

neighbourhood was frightened to-morrow morning by hearing that the poor creature was murdered in that terrible lonely hut."

"Good heavens!" cried Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who had listened with increasing horror and dismay to this colloquy—so that his hair literally stood on end: "is it possible that such a frightful atrocity——"

"Possible indeed!" ejaculated the Hangman: "aye—and very probable too. You see, sir, I am a farmer, living in these parts; and I have heard too much already of the dreadful character of the villains that infest Shooter's Hill."

"Villains indeed, Lord have mercy upon us!" said the landlord, looking as grave and solemn as his semi-intoxicated condition would permit.

"Poor thing, poor thing!" observed Sally Melmoth, clasping her hands in apparent dismay at the picture which her imagination was conjuring up: then fixing her eyes with fearful meaning upon the Baronet, she said, "Ah! sir, it would be a dreadful thing indeed if the poor young woman who has just saved *your* life, should lose her own on that very account!"

"By heavens, you have filled me with excruciating terror!" exclaimed Sir Douglas, starting from his seat. "I did not think the young woman would run such a dreadful risk—or else not for worlds would I have abandoned her in a cowardly manner. But I see that you are right—they are indeed murderous miscreants—and if they should suspect the poor creature——"

"I can't sit here quiet," interrupted the Hangman, also springing from his seat, "while perhaps murder is being done. No—I can't do it," he cried, with an air and tone of blunt honesty. "I'll go, even if I go alone—and prevent bloodshed there."

"No, brave man—you shall not go alone," exclaimed the Baronet, seizing Daniel Coffin's hand and pressing it with an effusion of the warmest admiration and gratitude. "We will go together—we will save that young woman if she be in danger: and at any rate we will take her away from her vile companions. See—I am armed with a knife," he added, unbuttoning his coat, and displaying the weapon which he had brought away with him from the hut.

"And I've fortunately got my barkers with me," said the Hangman, producing a pair of pistols. "But come—let us be off, Jack," he added, turning to the Foundling, "of course you will come with

us. The more we are, the stronger we shall be——"

"Oh! you shall not leave *me* behind," exclaimed Sally Melmoth: "I shall go with you. I long to be able to say a kind word to a woman who, though the companion of murderers, has dared to save a fellow creature's life at the hazard of her own."

"Well, you are a brave woman, wife," said the Hangman, pretending to tap her affectionately on the countenance: "and so you shall come. Now then, let us all be off."

The whole of this colloquy—indeed the entire scene, from the instant Sir Douglas Huntingdon crossed the threshold of the *Jolly Waggoner* until he issued forth again—scarcely occupied ten minutes. The theme of the discourse was full of excitement for the Baronet; and he found himself hurried away by a torrent of terrible misgivings relative to Nell Gibson on the one hand, and a chivalrous anxiety to redeem his character from any imputation of cowardice on the other. His feelings, therefore, being kept in a whirl the whole time, he neither had calmness enough to perceive that there was anything sinister in the looks of his new acquaintances, nor leisure to reflect upon the honesty of their motives. But yielding to the impulse which they had so artfully given to his feelings, he unhesitatingly sallied forth in company with the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling.

They all proceeded across the fields, the Hangman acting as the guide: and it was quite evident that, despite the Egyptian darkness which prevailed, he was well acquainted with the path. But then Sir Douglas Huntingdon remembered that the man had represented himself as a farmer belonging to the district: and it was therefore natural enough that he should be thus familiar with every inch of the locality. They advanced at a pace which was so rapid as to sustain the hurry of the Baronet's thoughts and the excitement of his feelings: and thus he had neither leisure nor scope for those reflections which would perhaps have engendered suspicions in his mind relative to the integrity of his present companions.

"There's the hut!" said the Hangman, as they presently beheld a light glimmering ahead.

They accordingly advanced stealthily; and as they drew nearer, they observed that lights were burning in the room above as well as in the apartment below. On reaching the hut, they peeped through one of the windows on the ground floor: the candles were flaring with long wicks on the tables—but no one was in the apartment.

"I suppose the ruffians are all out looking for me," said the Baronet, in a low whisper.

"Most likely," responded the Hangman. "Let us enter the cottage."

He accordingly opened the door and passed in followed by the Baronet, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling.

But scarcely had the party thus entered the hut when the Hangman sprang at Sir Douglas Huntingdon like a tiger darting at its prey, and dashed him on the floor with such violence that he was stunned by the ruffianly outrage. The Hangman then tore open the Baronet's coat; and taking away the knife which Sir Douglas had concealed about his person, the ruffian flung it to a distance. His next proceeding was to draw forth a piece of rope from one of his own capacious pockets, in order to bind the Baronet hand and foot.

"I'll go up-stairs and see who's there," said Sally Melmoth, while her paramour was thus employed. "Perhaps that traitress Nell Gibson is up above, as a light is burning there," she added.

"You had better take care," observed the Hangman. "If she suspects that she's found out she may do you a mischief: for she's not a woman to give in easy, I can tell you."

"Ah! then I had better prepare for a battle?" exclaimed Sally: and flinging off her bonnet and a cloak, she seized the knife in one hand and a candle in the other, her whole appearance suddenly denoting the natural ferocity of her disposition when her choler was once excited. "Now if that she-devil, who I always hated and also suspected should attempt any of her nonsense, I'll plunge *this* deep down into her heart:—and he brandished the knife menacingly, her countenance, which was by no means bad looking, being now distorted with the workings of diabolical passions.

"Go with her Jack," said Daniel Coffin, who was still employed in binding the Baronet's limbs. "I must make this fellow fast, so that he may give no trouble when he comes to himself. But I say, Sal,—and you too, Jack,—mind—no murder up above there! If you find Nell

Gibson, which I don't suppose you will, as the place is so quiet—but if you *do*, I say make her your prisoner: because we will wait till all the other fellows come back before dealing with either her or this Baronet here."

But before he had even finished speaking, Sally Melmoth had ascended the stairs, closely followed by Jack the Foundling. On reaching the top, they pushed open the great clumsy door: and bursting in, they were struck with amazement on beholding a young creature of about seventeen, and of exquisite beauty, sleeping tranquilly upon the wretched couch spread on the floor.

We should now observe that when the fair stranger had relapsed into a state of unconsciousness, in the manner already described, Nell Gibson had done her best to restore her to life. She soon succeeded; but so weak and exhausted was the lovely damsel in consequence of the fall she had sustained from the coach-top, that she only awoke from a state of insensibility to fall into one of profound slumber. Finding that she thus slept calmly, Nell Gibson had returned to her seat at the table, where she regaled herself with another glass of brandy. The effects of the liquor which she had imbibed so copiously, soon exhibited themselves in a deep drowsiness; and she fell fast asleep in a sort of nook or recess where the table stood. So sound was her slumber that she had not heard the arrival of the Hangman's party—not even the noise of the outrage upon the Baronet in the room below; but when the door of the upper chamber was burst open by Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling Nell Gibson awoke from her nap.

In the dulness and drowsiness which hung about her after so insufficient an amount of sleep, and with the fumes of liquor still obscuring her brain, she did not immediately observe who the persons were thus entering the chamber. But in a few moments her sight grew clearer—her ideas more collected: and rising from her seat she beheld Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling.

"Ah! what—are you here?" she exclaimed, addressing herself familiarly to the Hangman's mistress: but instantaneously perceiving that this woman carried a knife in her hand, and that her countenance was positively hideous with the distortions and workings of dire passion, Nell Gibson saw that something was wrong: with admirable presence of mind, however, she said, "What is the matter?"

"Who is that girl?" demanded Sally glancing down towards the fair stranger.

"What do you mean by coming up here to me with that knife in your hand, and with these ferocious looks?" asked Nell Gibson, her own spirit rising and her eyes flashing fire upon the Hangman's mistress.

But before any further words were exchanged between the two women, the Hangman himself, having finished binding the Baronet's limbs, made his appearance in the chamber, and was as much struck as Sally Melmoth and the Foundling had been on observing the sweet girl, who, started by the sound of angry voices, was now opening her eyes in alarm.

"Here is the traitress!" exclaimed Sally Melmoth, pointing savagely with the knife towards Nell Gibson.

"Traitor! whom do you dare call a traitress?" cried the young woman fortified—or rather rendered desperate by the brandy she had imbibed so plentifully.

"Ah! we have got your Baronet, Miss Nelly—we have brought him back with us, I can tell you!" exclaimed the Hangman's mistress in a jeering and taunting tone.

A livid paleness overspread Nell Gibson's countenance as she saw that her proceeding of that night with regard to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, was thus positively known: and bold though she naturally was—armed too as she now likewise was with an artificial stimulant—she nevertheless felt her heart sink down completely within her, for she knew full well that *her's* was a treachery which her companions in crime seldom forgave, and the punishment of which was *death*!

"Ah! you see that she is guilty—her looks betray her!" yelled forth the infuriate Sally Melmoth: and raising her knife, she sprang like a tiger-cat towards Nell Gibson, who, cruelly alarmed, fled screaming horribly into the nook where the table stood.

"Do not murder her, Sal!" cried the Hangman, in a voice of thunder, as he seized upon his enraged mistress and threw his arms round her to hold her back while Jack the Foundling proceeded to wrest the knife from her grasp.

But here we must observe that although only just awakened from a profound slumber, the fair stranger was nevertheless startled into the fullest consciousness by the fearful scene that thus suddenly burst upon her vision. Instantaneously comprehending that instead of being beneath some hospitable roof, she was in a den of murderous miscreants, the affrighted girl sprang up from the bed and rushed to the

door. Terror—the keenest, acutest, most poignant terror—gave her wings that made her movements rapid as the lightning flash: and all her senses being suddenly endowed with the most vivid clearness, in this moment of life or death, it was no wonder if she observed that on the outer side of the chamber-door there was a large bolt. With admirable presence of mind she dashed to the door, and with her taper fingers shot the bolt into its socket: then precipitating herself down the stairs, now knowing what obstacles she might have to encounter, she alighted in the chamber below.

At first it struck her as being empty: but an ejaculation of mingled surprise and outcry reached her ears—and then her eyes fell upon the Baronet who had just returned to consciousness. Without wasting a single moment in words, the courageous girl proceeded to action: and observing that a cupboard stood open, she threw a rapid glance upon its shelves. A knife was what she sought for—and a knife did she find accordingly. In another instant she was upon her knees, cutting the cords which bound the Baronet's limbs.

It was a moment of awful suspense and excruciating alarm for both. The Hangman was thundering at the door above, evidently dashing himself with all the weight of his form against it,—while the process of cutting the cords was calculated to occupy nearly a minute. A minute!—Ah! it is nothing in the ordinary events of life: but it is an age—when life itself is trembling in the balance or hanging to a thread!

But now the last piece of cord is cut—the bonds fall off the Baronet's limbs—and starting to his feet he grasps the hand of his fair deliverer with an effusion of gratitude that is in itself a love—a worship—a devotion.

"Away, dear girl—away!" he cried, retaining that fair hand in his own that he might guide her from the hut.

At the same instant the door to the chamber was burst open: but with such fury did the Hangman precipitate himself down the stairs, that missing the steps he fell heavily from top to bottom. To this circumstance, perhaps, did the Baronet and his fair companion owe their safety: for as they darted forth from the hut, plunging into the utter darkness of the night, they had the advantage of the few moments which were lost by Daniel Coffin in picking himself up and trying his limbs to feel, if any were broken. Then forth he sped

in pursuit of the fugitives,—Sally Melmoth and Jack the Founding remaining behind him to keep guard over Nell Gibson.

Sir Douglas proceeded at random as he guided his fair companion, thinking less of taking any special direction than of placing as great a distance as possible between themselves and the hut. Speedily emerging from the thicket, he paused for an instant to listen whether there were any sounds of pursuit; but he could hear nothing save the heart-beatings of that young girl who now clung with apparent exhaustion to his arm.

"We are not pursued," he said in a hurried whisper: "do you think you can walk a little way farther—only a little way?—and then perhaps we shall reach some place of safety."

"Yes—O yes!" she murmured, in a tone that nevertheless was fraught with the accents of desperation. "I feel that I am sinking—and yet I must proceed—our lives depend upon it!"

"Oh! for God's sake make an effort—make an effort!" whispered the Baronet, in a tone of intense earnestness: and scarcely caring for himself at the moment, he felt as much—yes, as profoundly—for this sweet girl as if she were a beloved sister or one whom he had long loved and who was to become his wife.

They advanced again, his arm thrown round her slender waist to support her; and in this manner they proceeded for about ten minutes. Their eyes, growing accustomed to the deep darkness, enabled them to distinguish the obscure outline of the path which they were pursuing; and to the joy of the Baronet, he found that they were rapidly nearing the main road. But his fair companion now grew so faint that she clung to him like a dead weight: and he had to carry rather than support her. That sudden flaming up of her courage, her spirit, and her presence of mind in the hut, had led to a reaction which was gradually prostrating her completely; and by the time they emerged from the fields into the high road, the Baronet was made painfully aware that she was fainting in his arms.

At this moment the sounds of rapidly approaching wheels were heard, and coming too in the same direction which they were pursuing. In a few moments the lights of a vehicle appeared; and on the Baronet hailing it, to his joy it proved to be a return post-chaise journeying empty to London.

We need hardly say that he took immediate possession of it, carefully placing

his fair companion upon the cushions inside; and on reaching London, she was consigned in a state of alarming exhaustion to the care of the Baronet's housekeeper Mrs. Baines.

CHAPTER LXXXII.

THE INTERESTING INVALID.

After a profound slumber of some hours' duration, the fair stranger awoke to find herself lying on a comfortable couch, in a handsomely furnished chamber, and with a motherly-looking person standing by the bedside. The heavy curtains were drawn over the windows, and the room was darkened evidently for the purpose of preventing the invalid's slumber being disturbed by a glare of light: but through an opening in the drapery stole a golden beam of the sun—and thus the damsel knew that it was broad daylight without.

Then, as a crowd of memories rushed into her brain, a strong shuddering shook her; and it seemed as if some source of ineffable anguish were rending her very heart-strings.

"My poor girl, what ails you?—what do you feel?" asked Mrs. Baines, bending over her and speaking in a tone accompanied with a look of such true maternal kindness that the tears gushed out from the maiden's eyes as if all the founts of her tenderest and deepest feelings were opened. "You have something that troubles you very much, my dear child—something that afflicts you sorely," continued the housekeeper. "I do not ask you to reveal to me your secrets; but remember that you saved the life of my master, Sir Douglas Huntingdon: and therefore, through a feeling of gratitude—if for no other motive—I am anxious and ready to do anything to serve you."

The fair girl gazed up with a look of unspeakable feeling at Mrs. Baines: and then her lips moved as if a revelation were wavering upon them; but whether it were so or not the good woman could not precisely tell. At all events, before the invalid had time to utter a word, the door opened and Dr. Copperas entered the room.

"Ah! here is the doctor," whispered Mrs. Baines to the invalid: then turning towards the physician, she said, "I am glad you have come, sir—for this poor dear girl here seems dreadfully exhausted."

"Well, Mrs. Baines, we shall soon put her to rights," said the physician, seating

himself by the bedside and proceeding to feel the damsel's pulse. "Sir Douglas sent for me three or four hours ago—indeed at nine o'clock this morning, I believe——"

"Yes, sir," observed Mrs. Baines: "and now it is past mid-day."

"True: but I was at a consultation with that very remarkable and extraordinary man Doctor Thurston. Indeed, Miss. Baines, if it were possible to change conditions in this world, and if I had my choice, I think I would sooner be Doctor Thurston than any one I know."

"Well, sir, this is most singular," observed the housekeeper: "for I remember that about six weeks ago, when our coachman broke his leg and you were out of town at the time, Sir Douglas called in Doctor Thurston, and I recollect that the Doctor whispered to me after he had given his opinion on the case, that it was precisely one which *you*, sir, ought to have superintended."

"Did he though? Well, that is very remarkable," cried Doctor Copperas, affecting to be quite amazed: then turning to the fair stranger, he said, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon has just explained to me all the incidents of the preceding night so far as they relate to himself. Had you been long in that hut whence you both escaped so marvellously?—and had you been ill-treated, during your stay there?"

"I had not been there, sir, more than an hour or two," was the answer, "when the incidents occurred which led to our escape: and I certainly received no harsh nor severe treatment:"—then after a short pause, the damsel continued to observe, "I had taken my place on the outside of the night-coach for Dover—it was upset on Shooter's Hill—and I must have been stunned by the fall, for I remember nothing more until I awoke in that hut."

"Excuse the question I am about to ask," said Doctor Copperas. "Had you previously been suffering from privations or sorrows?"

But the damsel suddenly burst into tears; and the physician, although by no means of tender disposition, was touched by this eloquent yet silent response to his query.

"Ah! poor girl—exhaustion—general debility—too great excitement—fearful reaction," muttered the Doctor to himself. "Well, you will be taken care of her and I shall come and see you again in the evening. Now Mrs. Baines, pen, ink, and paper, if you please, and draw the curtain a little."

The housekeeper hastened to obey these instructions, and Doctor Copperas proceeded to write the prescription, observing as he did so, "that he felt convinced he was about to adopt the very same treatment which that eminent and remarkable man Doctor Thurston would have recommended had he been called in."

Having concluded his Esculapian hieroglyphics, he turned towards the bed, saying in a bland tone of inquiry, "And now, what is the name of my interesting patient?"

At the instant that the doctor began the first words of his question, the damsel's cheeks were colourless as alabaster: but scarcely had the final syllables fallen from his lips, when all the blood in her veins seemed to rush to her countenance, suffusing it with the deepest crimson.

"Ah! my dear child," cried Mrs. Baines, "if the Doctor has said anything indiscreet, do not annoy yourself. God knows you can bear no more excitement! I am sure when you were brought home here at three o'clock this morning, in such a state of exhaustion that you could not speak, and your very reason seemed to be abandoning you—But, heavens!" ejaculated the housekeeper, suddenly interrupting herself as a fresh torrent of tears now gushed out from the poor girl's eyes: "what ails you, my dear child—what ails you?"

The damsel could however give no response, even if she wished to do so; her voice was lost in deep and suffocating sobs: but looking up with an expression of ineffable gratitude upon her countenance, she took Mrs. Baines's hand and pressed it to her lips.

"There, there," said Doctor Copperas, "I am afraid I said something indiscreet: but I would not wound the poor girl's feelings for the world. As for the prescription, I have made it out in the name of *Miss Smith*, which by the bye is the name that in similar circumstances is invariably adopted by that ornament of the profession, Doctor Thurston."

Doctor Copperas now took his leave; and when he was gone Mrs. Baines addressed the invalid in the kindest and most endearing manner that she could possibly adopt; for the housekeeper was indeed an excellent-hearted and worthy woman; and though in the service of a master renowned for his dissipated habits and rakish conduct, she herself was of unimpeachable respectability.

"Now, my dear girl," she said, bending over the couch, and whispering with soothing softness of tone in the invalid's

ear, "you have some secret grief which is gnawing at your very heart's core. I do not ask you to tell me what it is: but I *do* ask you to tell me if there is anything that can be done to alleviate it. Should you choose to trust me, you would find that I would go fifty miles to serve you, but not raise a finger to injure you. I saw plain enough that you did not like to mention your name; but I am sure that if there is any harm attached thereto, it is not you yourself who have brought the stain upon it. No—there is innocence in your looks—the candour of purity upon your brow—Ah! and the manner in which you now regard me proves that I am right in believing you to be the dear good girl I hoped and wished the first instant I saw you. But even if you *had* done anything wrong, there is forgiveness to be obtained. Oh! now I see again, by that deprecating look so softly earnest, that it is not so. No—you are all that is good—I am certain you are. Tell me, then, dear child, what can be done for you and recollect that my master owes you so deep a debt of gratitude, there is no trouble he would shun and no expense he would spare to render you a service and lighten your heart of the load of affliction."

"My kindest, best friend," exclaimed the invalid, throwing her arms around the neck of the good housekeeper. "I will tell you everything. Yes—I will tell you all: and then you will comprehend wherefore I am unhappy—why I am tortured with a devouring suspense—and also why I hesitated to mention a name which nevertheless, God knows, has never been disgraced by me. But Oh! before I commence my narrative—let me beg of you—let me implore you to grant me a boon—"

"Speak, dear child!" exclaimed the housekeeper "what is it?"

"Will you procure me a newspaper of to-day?" said the fair stranger in a low soft tone, as if she even hesitated to solicit so trifling a favour.

"In a moment," cried Mrs. Baines: and disappearing from the room for a short time, she returned with a morning journal, saying, "Sir Douglas always takes this newspaper, and therefore it was handy in the house at the moment."

But while she was thus speaking, the invalid, with a sudden access of frenzied excitement, had snatched—or indeed, rather torn the journal from the matron's hand; and sitting up in the bed, as if that feverish excitement had nerved her with sudden strength, she ran her eye over the columns with the breathless suspense and

excruciating uncertainty of one who is about to behold the clearing up of a matter of life or death.

"Thank God!" she exclaimed, "he is safe!"

Then, as if this sudden acquirement of a certainty and abrupt term to a harrowing suspense, were to be followed by a reaction proportionately strong and painful, she fell back in a state of utter prostration alike of mind and body. Mrs. Baines hastened to administer a cordial and apply other restoratives: but hours elapsed, and evening was drawing its veil of obscurity over the hemisphere, before the invalid had so far recovered as to be enabled to converse again. Then with only a few brief words of preface, to the effect that she yearned to unbosom the secrets that lay heavy upon her soul, the poor girl poured forth her revelations to the friendly ear of the matron

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Two hours later—indeed, at about nine o'clock that same evening—Mrs. Baines and Sir Douglas Huntingdon were closeted together in earnest deliberation.

"Ariadne Varian," said the Baronet repeating the words several times. "How prettily the name sounds: it is really most appropriate for such a charming creature. Do you know, Mrs. Baines, that I really feel—But no matter," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself.

"Ah! sir, I know what you were going to say," observed the housekeeper: "and really if you would not think it rude nor unbecoming on my part, I should so earnestly advise you to think of marriage—"

"Well, well," said the Baronet, laughing; "I suppose I must think of it some day or another. But let me read over again this paragraph relative to poor Ariadne's brother; and then you shall tell me at full length and in detail, all those incidents that you have gleaned from her lips and which you have as yet only sketched so briefly to me,"

"Please to read the passage aloud, sir," said Mrs. Baines: "for I only glanced hurriedly over it just now."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon accordingly took up the newspaper and read aloud the ensuing passage:—

"I will be in the recollection of our readers that at the last sessions of the Old Bailey, a respectable-looking and genteel young man, named Theodore Varian, was sentenced to transportation for seven years for embezzling monies and falsifying accounts while in the service of Mr.

Emmerson, the well known stock-broker of Birch Lane. On the trial, it will be borne in mind, the young man pleaded guilty, and told somewhat pathetic tale relative to having made free with his master's money to pay debts contracted during a beloved sister's illness. Up to this point the sympathy of the whole court had been evidently in his favour; but it will be remembered that he proceeded to accuse Mr. Emmerson of having held out threats and made infamous proposals relative to his sister. As a matter of course, Mr. Emmerson indignantly denied the imputation; and the learned Recorder, to whom Mr. Emmerson's high character, in the City is of course well known, told the prisoner very plainly that all previous sympathy excited in his behalf, was not merely destroyed, but was succeeded by loathing and contempt for this base endeavour to calumniate his employer. Hence the severe sentence of seven years' transportation which his lordship deemed it right to pass upon the prisoner.

"We have recapitulated these facts which were before published in our columns, in order to remind our readers of the artful cunning and unprincipled disposition of this young man, whose external appearance and genteel manners at first enlisted so much sympathy in his favour. And if any farther proof were wanted of the right estimate which the learned Recorder formed of his consummate duplicity, such proof will be found in the occurrence we are about to relate. In a word, this Theodore Varian escaped from Newgate last night in a very remarkable manner. It appears that during the day the order had been received for the removal of himself and other convicts to Woolwich, preparatory to their departure for the penal settlement. As the order arrived suddenly, the convicts were permitted to see their friends until a late hour last evening: and it is remembered by the gaol authorities that Theodore Varian was visited by his sister, who was clad in an ample cloak. At nine o'clock the bell rang as a signal for all visitors to depart; and as there were some fifty or sixty strangers, male and female, at the time, it is supposed that Varian must have suddenly slipped on his sister's cloak, and probably a bonnet and veil which it would have been easy for her to conceal under that cloak. At all events, shortly after the strangers had departed, Theodore Varian was missed; and the above explanation is the only solution that can be given as to the mode of escape. Up to the

hour of going to press, we have not heard of his recapture.

"And the conjecture, then, relative to the method of the escape, is the right one," said the Baronet, as he laid down the newspaper. "But you must now give me all the details of Ariadne's narrative."

"With much pleasure, sir," replied Mrs. Baines. "It appears that Theodore and Ariadne are orphans, and that they entertain the sincerest affection for each other—an affection not only natural in consequence of the ties of brother and sister, but also strengthened by the keen appreciation of that orphan lot which they have together endured from childhood. It is true that Theodore self-appropriated some of Mr. Emmerson's money; and I feel confident it is also true that the hard-hearted, griping, greedy citizen *did* tell the unhappy Theodore that if within three days he did not prepare his sister to surrender her honour, the worst should ensue. This was towards the close of September; and for the three following days Ariadne says that her poor brother seemed to be frenzied with grief. It was not until the third night that he revealed to his sister the horrors of his position and the deeper infamy into which Emmerson tried to plunge them both. Ariadne was at first distracted; but in a short time the natural strength of her character enabled her to speak with calmness upon the position in which herself and unhappy brother were involved. To be brief, they saw no alternative but flight;—and having hastily disposed of everything saleable, and thus reduced the amount of their worldly possessions to the compass of two small bundles containing changes of raiment, they fled from the metropolis."

"Poor orphans!" said the Baronet, in a low tone and with an involuntary sigh. "But go on, Mrs. Baines—go on."

"They got a lift in some vehicle as far as Hounslow, where they passed the night. In the next room to the one where Varian slept, two persons of evidently queer character were lodged; and not being aware that the partition was so thin as it was, they conversed unrestrainedly. Theodore could not help hearing every word they said; and he found that they were two highwaymen. They were boasting of their exploits: and from what they said it appeared that there was always a much better chance of an offender against the laws concealing himself in London than in any country districts. In fine, their discourse made such an impression upon Theodore, that he resolved to retrace his

way to the capital. In the morning he communicated to his sister all he had overheard, and the resolution he had formed in consequence; and accordingly, when night came again they returned to London. Hiding themselves in a garret in some low neighbourhood, they passed a fortnight in a state of continual terrors, apprehensions, and alarms. They also lived most frugally—even miserably—in order to eke out their scanty resources. Poor orphans! how often and often must their tears have been mingled as they thought of the present and the past, but dared not look forward to the future! Oh! it makes my heart bleed to think what this dear sweet girl must have suffered. Is it not shocking, sir, that such a heavenly creature—such an angelic being—should be doomed to know such bitter affliction? Only fancy those soft azure eyes weeping such bitter tears—only fancy those lovely pale cheeks, just like damask, being scalded with floods of anguish!—Ah! and fancy too, that those lips which look like rose-buds, should ever wreath otherwise than the sunniest smiles."

"Mrs. Baines, you are growing quite poetical," said the Baronet, who was in reality deeply affected. "Come, pray proceed," he observed hurriedly: "you were telling me how this poor girl and her brother lived for a fortnight in that wretched garret. Psha!" he suddenly cried: "what the deuce is the meaning of this?—and he dashed a tear from his eye."

"Shall I give you a glass of wine, sir?" asked Mrs. Baines, perceiving that he was profoundly touched, and thinking that he required something to console him.

"No—not a drop, I thank you—I never was less in a humour to drink in my life," he exclaimed. "Pray go on."

"Well sir, at the end of that fortnight the young man resolved to make an endeavour to find employment under another name. He accordingly went out to seek for such employment; but as several hours passed and he did not return, poor Ariadne could no longer restrain the terrors that were devouring her. She rushed forth wildly to seek for him—to make inquiries after him: and she soon learnt the fatal truth. He had been arrested—taken before the Lord Mayor—and committed to Newgate! O God! I can enter fully and deeply into the anguish which the poor girl must have experienced as these terrible tidings burst upon her! Of course I need not say that from the day of his arrest to that of his escape, she visited him as often and

remained with him as long as the prison regulations would allow. The sessions were being held at the time when he was arrested; and he was tried a few days after. This was a month ago. You have seen, sir, by the newspaper that he pleaded guilty, and that he was condemned to seven years' transportation. If he had not told the truth about Emmerson's infamous proposals, he would perhaps only have had two years' imprisonment: but because he boldly endeavoured to unmask the villain, the Judge threw aside all sympathy."

"You see, Mrs. Baines, Emmerson is a man of wealth," observed the baronet,— "a man of high standing in the City—a member of the Common Council, too—and what is more, a staunch Tory. Besides which, he has got a splendid house at Clapham; and no doubt the Recorder frequently dines with him. So you perceive it is easy to account for the Judge's behaviour on the bench in Theodore Varian's case. But now for the rest of your narrative."

"A few more words will conclude it, sir," said Mrs. Baines. "From the moment of Varian's condemnation, he and his sister never lost an opportunity of discussing the possibility of his escape. The hope of effecting this alone sustained them. Ariadne tells me that she has lain awake whole nights, pondering upon the chances for and against such a consummation. She says that for hours and hours her thoughts have never wandered away from this one subject. At length the plan was settled;—and yesterday was the day for carrying it into execution. Having half starved herself to eke out her scanty resources, the poor girl had just sufficient to enable her to pay her own coach-fare to Dover, and afford her brother a few shillings to purchase food during his journey thither. The newspaper tells you how the escape was accomplished. No sooner did Ariadne find that the project had succeeded, and that her brother, disguised in the cloak and bonnet, was safe outside the terrible doors of Newgate, than she almost went mad with the delirium of joy. But she was compelled to part immediately from Theodore, for fear of exciting suspicion and affording a trace for pursuers and while he set off on foot on his journey to Dover, the young maiden took her place outside the night-coach. Of course their ultimate intention was to escape over to France, the captain of one of the boys plying between Dover and Calais being well acquainted with the Varians and well disposed towards them. In conclusion,

sir," added Mrs. Baines, "let me observe that when poor Ariadne entered for a sight of the newspaper, it was to ascertain whether her brother had got safe away or had been re-captured after she parted from him."

"And you have got the exact address where she was to meet her brother at Dover?" said the Baronet inquiringly.

"I wrote it down on this slip of paper from Ariadne's own lips," responded Mrs. Baines: "and here it is."

"Well, I wonder now whether that fellow James is ready to take his departure," cried the Baronet, looking at his watch. "It is nine o'clock."

But at this moment the door opened; and the valet James made his appearance, muffled up as for a journey.

"Now, James," said Sir Douglas Huntingdon, in a serious tone, "I can of course rely upon you, as this matter is one not only of delicacy but also most confidentially sacred. You will travel with all possible speed to Dover; and there you will seek this address," continued the Baronet: placing the slip of paper in the servant's hands. "You will ask for *Theodore Varian* and when you mention the name of *Ariadne* as a pass-word you will obtain access to this same Theodore. You will then give him this purse; and urge him to lose no time in escaping to Calais. Tell him that his sister has found kind friends in London—and that moreover measures will be taken to obtain a free pardon for himself. You may add that in the course of a day or two his sister will write to him full particulars, addressed to the Post-Office in Calais."

The Baronet placed a heavy purse in the hands of his faithful servant, who forthwith took his departure in a post-chaise for Dover: and the moment he was gone Mr. Baines returned to Ariadne's chamber. The fair invalid was just awaking from a deep slumber, in which the good house-keeper had left her ere now:—and the assurance that the messenger had departed to meet her brother at Dover, relieved her gentle breast of its chief anxiety. Doctor Copperas presently paid her another visit, and declared that she was going on as favourably as he could expect, adding aside to Mrs. Baines, "that he did not think she could have progressed better since mid-day, even if under the care of that eminent and distinguished man, Doctor Thurston."

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

THE RAKE AND THE RAKE'S VICTIM.

Scarcely had Mrs. Baines quitted the apartment where she had been conversing with the Baronet when a domestic entered to state that a female desired to speak with him upon important business. Not knowing who she might be, and never refusing a female visit, Sir Douglas Huntingdon ordered her to be admitted. A woman, somewhat flauntingly dressed and with a dark veil over her countenance, was shown in: but the instant she crossed the threshold, and even before she raised the veil, the Baronet guessed who she was. Nor was he mistaken: for advancing towards him, she lifted her veil and disclosed the features of Nell Gibson.

"Ah! I am glad you are come—I am delighted to see you are safe and sound," he exclaimed, with the most unaffected sincerity. "But, good heavens! how did you escape from those murderous wretches? I have been tortured with the cruellest alarms concerning you. At one moment I was resolved to give information at Bow Street of all that had occurred: but then I feared that if you had really escaped after all, I should only be compromising you—and *that*, for many reasons, you are well aware I would not do for the world. Besides which I felt assured, that if you escaped the dangers and the violence that were imminent at the moment I left the hut, you would escape altogether."

While the Baronet was giving vent to those rapidly uttered expressions, Nell Gibson seated herself near the fire and gazed upon him with a species of tender interest that seemed strange indeed with one who led such a life and possessed such a heart as she.

"And how knew you," she said, in a gentle and even tremulous voice, "that such dangers menaced me?"

"In the first place because I discovered when it was too late, that I had revealed to a set of miscreants the kindness you had shown towards me," answered the Baronet;—"I mean, that man, that woman, and that youth whom I accompanied back to the hut. Moreover, when I recovered my senses while bound hand and foot in the room below, I overheard the accusation of '*traitress*' levelled against yourself, and then your piercing screams. Ah! Ellen, I can assure you that those screams have rung in my ears ever since!"

"And the young girl whom you brought

away with you?" said Nell Gibson inquiringly.

"Oh! she is safe and will be taken care of," returned the Baronet. "But wherefore was she borne to the hut?"

"Do not ask me," said Nell Gibson "for no good, you may be sure! Ah! you do not appear satisfied with what I say? Well then, it was to make her as bad as I am."

"Enough!" ejaculated Sir Douglas Huntingdon, with a shudder; and then he fixed his eyes upon Nell Gibson, as if to scrutinize thoroughly her entire appearance.

"Ah! you may well look at me," she cried in a tone of bitterness: "I am no doubt changed since first you knew me. That was four years ago. I was then a merry laughing girl of between fifteen and sixteen—yes, and an innocent girl too—"

"Do not think of the past, Ellen," said the Baronet, scarcely able to suppress a sigh as he mentally compared the young woman as she *now* appeared with the young girl as she *was* a few years back. "You last night perilled your life to save mine: tell me, then, what can I do for you?"

"You will give me the hundred guineas for this letter," she said, producing the one which he had written at the hut. "That is all I ask of you—and it will be means of saving my life."

"Can you fear for a moment that I shall hesitate?" exclaimed the Baronet. "I will give you the hundred guineas wherewith to appease those vile men; and I will give you another hundred guineas—aye, or even three or four hundred, for yourself."

"No—not a shilling—not a farthing," said Nell Gibson, firmly and decisively. "Since the day I left you, never, never have I sought succour at your hand: and I would sooner perish—yes, perish miserably—than receive such succour from you!"

"But wherefore, Ellen?" said the Baronet, in amazement. "There is something unnatural—something perverse in this."

"No—it is natural enough, if you do but understand the mind of a woman. Since I left you I have endured many and many privations: I have known what it is to want bread—aye, I have known what it is to feel starvation! Or else do you think, if it had not been through some desperate necessity, I should ever have fallen into the company in which you found me last night? But even when perishing as it

were with famine, I never once applied to you."

"But you were wrong, Ellen—you were wrong," said the Baronet. "Whatever had occurred, my purse would always have been open to you."

"Oh! yes—I knew *that*; and it was the thought of your kindness that stung me to the very quick. And therefore, so far from being wrong," she exclaimed suddenly assuming a proud look that for moment rendered her really and truly handsome—"so far from being in the wrong," she repeated, "I was in the right: for although fallen so low and become so debased, degraded, and vile, I still had my own little feelings of pride—"

"With what wretched sophistry have you deluded yourself!" interrupted the Baronet. Was I not your seducer?—did not inflict the most terrible wrong upon you which selfish man can possibly perpetrate towards confiding woman?"

"Aye—if we had always stood in the light of *seducer* and *victim*," said Nell Gibson, "it would have been different. Then I should have had a claim upon you and would not have hesitated to assert it. But if *you* inflicted the first wrong upon *me*, I subsequently inflicted another upon you. I proved faithless to you when you loved me so well and cherished me so fondly. I deceived you most grossly—and there was something vile—yes, beyond all expression, vile in my conduct when I robbed and plundered you to expend the proceeds of my iniquity upon a paramour. Well then, instead of remaining your victim I became a wrong doer towards you and every claim that I might have possessed upon your consideration was forfeited. Yes—I felt all this; and again I tell you that I would sooner have died—aye, have perished miserably—than have received as the pittance of charity, that which once came from a noble bounty! Rather would I have sunk down through famine, than have obtained from your pity that which I once received from your fondest love! Besides, when I left you I was clothed in silk and satin—and no earthly consideration would have induced me to reappear before you in the rags of beggary."

"But still," observed the Baronet, much moved by the language which thus poured with such undoubted sincerity from the young woman's lips—"but still in the depths of your soul remained a certain fondness and affection for me; otherwise you would not have perilled your life to save mine last night."

"Listen to me," exclaimed Nell Gibson:

"and I will unfold to you the maze and mysteries of a woman's heart—not merely of one woman, nor of my heart alone—but the feeling which is peculiar to us all! In the bosom of the vilest, most degraded, and most crime-stained of the unfortunate woman whom the lust of man or the iron sway of poverty has flung upon the streets,—yes in the bosom of even the foulest, lowest, and vilest prostitute, there is one small sanctuary in which an image is treasured up as the idol of a worship: and this is the image of the seducer! In retrospect over years of crime, the unfortunate woman carries her recollections back to the period of her girlhood and her first virgin love. Even though it was the love which robbed her of that virginity and steeped her in disgrace, it is nevertheless the one bright spot in her chequered career. Yes—if we look back through a vista of rags, and filth and poverty, and wretchedness, and crime still do we behold at the beginning that bright and sunny period when hopes were golden and the heart gushed forth with all the freshest feelings of youth. Then is it that the image of the loved one—though perhaps no longer loved—is reproduced vividly to the memory: nor is he thought of as a mere seducer—no, nor is that past spring-tide of joy looked back upon as the very source whence all subsequent pollutions have flowed. Now, then, do you understand me? Since I fled from you I have received the embraces of many many men—I have been glad to sell myself for gold or for silver;—I have given myself up to suitors in moments of sensuality;—at other times, almost without passion and without impulse, I have abandoned myself to strangers through mere profligacy. And yet, though thus drinking the cup of vice to the very dregs, and dragging myself as it were through all kinds of moral filth and pollution, there has still always been one image that I have cherished in the sanctuary of my heart and which no stains of vice nor shades of misery could possibly efface. That image is *yours*: and you are the only living being for whom I would have perilled my life last night, or would peril it again! Nay—had you been any other person, I should have seen you killed without pity and without remorse."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon had listened in speechless amazement to this address, which the young woman delivered with an impressive seriousness that precluded all doubt as to her sincerity. Besides, which, her actions at the hut had fully proven the existence of that sentiment with regard

to her seducer which she now explained; and as with rapid glance the Baronet's mental vision swept over the past, he comprehended full well how such a state of feelings as that which she had described, could be.

Four years had elapsed since he had first encountered Ellen Gibson upon one of his estates in a distant country. Her parents were dead; she had no relatives, but was living with friends. Her education had been tolerably well cared for: indeed, she had been reared in a manner above her means or her expectations. The Baronet saw her and loved her; and she loved him in return. Marriage was not spoken of between a man of rank and wealth and a young girl of rustic parentage: but she became his mistress. He brought her to London—lodged her in a sumptuous mansion—gave her carriages, horses, servants—in fine, all the luxuries and elegancies of life. But she soon formed other connexions; and her profligacy, developing itself with remarkable suddenness, hurried her away with a sort of frenetic speed. Sir Douglas discovered her infidelity, and wrote to remonstrate—even offering her forgiveness: for he was infatuated with her at the time. But instead of answered his note, she sold off the entire contents of the mansion, the carriages, horses, even to his own plate which she had with her at the time: and taking her departure she lavished the produce upon a paramour who had not a single quality, personal, mental, or social, that could compare with those of the Baronet. Since that period her career had been one of those rapid downward ones which furnish so many a history of female crime: and therefore seeing what she now was, and what she once had been, Sir Douglas Huntingdon could scarcely feel astonished if from the dark depths of her present position she occasionally cast wistful, longing, and even loving eyes backward upon that epoch which formed the brightest page in her life's history.

"But wherefore," he said, after a long pause, "should you go back to those dreadful men? Tell me—would you like to abandon the sort of existence you are now leading?"

"God knows I would!" returned the young woman, in a voice expressive of the deepest feeling. "But it is impossible—it is impossible!" she immediately added shaking her head, while an expression of unutterable despair swept over her countenance.

"Why impossible?" demanded the

Baronet, in amazement: "can you not to-morrow if you choose retire into some agreeable seclusion? What if I were to go early in the morning and take a nice respectable lodging for you——"

"Oh! no, no—it is impossible!" interrupted Nell Gibson, impatiently. "You are not aware—you cannot imagine how difficult it is to extricate one's self from the meshes of crime——"

"Do you mean to tell me," said the Baronet, contemplating the young woman in dismay,—"solemnly and seriously tell me, that you are so inveterately wedded to this shocking course of life——"

"My God! no—ten thousand times no!"—interrupted Nell Gibson, a sort of agony sweeping over her features. "Have I not told you that I would abandon this wretched, wretched mode of life if I could? And, oh! words have no power to tell the deep, deep horror—the intense loathing—which I at times feel for such an existence. Ere now I spoke of my depravities, and I said that often when neither tempted by gold or prompted by passion, I flung myself into the embraces of the merest strangers. Well, perhaps if I had described my humour on such occasions as the recklessness of *despair* instead of the wantonness of sheer *depravity*, I should have been nearer the mark. Yes—to drive away thought I must always have some kind of excitement. I hate brandy; but I drink it often and often—I feel that it hardens me. I am always ready to do anything wrong—aye, even to commit unnecessary or unprofitable crimes, sooner than do nothing: and for the same reason do I seek the excitement of all possible profligacies. By these means do I expel *thought*, and thus manage to maintain a calm and even happy exterior.

"But wherefore, I again ask," said the Baronet, "should you not abandon this course of life if you wish? Wherefore return to those horrible companions?"

"Because I am so utterly and completely in their power," answered the young woman. "Wherever I might hide myself, they would seek me out: aye, even did I fly to the ends of the earth, they would pursue me—they would discover my retreat—they would murder me! when once a person gets deep in with such companionship, it is impossible to extricate oneself. No—it cannot be done. You see how completely I am in the power of wretches, by coming here for these hundred guineas to propitiate them."

"Ah! and this reminds me to inquire" said the Baronet, "how you saved your-

self from their fury, and what colouring you gave to the adventure."

"That man who enticed you back to the hut, was none other than the Public Executioner," replied Nell Gibson. "There—start not—speak not—what matters it now who he was? I tell you all this, of course being well aware that you will take no advantage of it. The woman who came with him is his mistress; and the lad his apprentice. Sally Melmoth—that is the woman's name—has long had a spite against me, because she fancies I have been over intimate with her flash man. But no

not for the world! Base and profligate as I know I am, there is a lower depth even than the lowest which I have sunk; and that is the arms of the public hangman. But to return to last night's affair. The Hangman and the apprentice prevented the infuriate woman from doing me a mischief: and while the Hangman himself burst open the door and rushed after you and the young girl, his mistress and the lad kept guard upon me. Presently the Hangman came back, after a fruitless search: and almost at the same time the other men returned from an equally unavailing hunt after you. They were all savage enough; and I thought that everything was over with me. So I prepared for the worst. The Hangman told the other men how you had sought refuge at the public-house in the bye lane—how you had innocently let slip the admission that you owed your life to to me—and how he had enticed you back to the hut to be disposed of as the whole gang should think fit. The man that I am now living with—he who brought you down the writing paper and who is called the Buttoner—then declared that from the first moment he suspected I had given you such information, and this suspicion on his part had been confirmed by the circumstance that I had accidentally let out to the stout man whose name is Bencull, that you were a Baronet, this circumstance proving that I knew you before. All these statements and remarks were made in my presence; and ferocious looks glared upon me from every eye. I saw that nothing but the sudden exertion of all my presence of mind could save me; and I accordingly exclaimed, "*Well I confess that all you have said is true; but the man whose life I have this night saved, was my first love—indeed the only man I ever sincerely and truly did love. I know it was vain and useless to beg his life at your hands; and therefore I gave him the whispered information which led him to flee. You*

may kill me if you like; but I would do so over again this moment, in spite of all consequences. That is however no reason why I should betray you in other things; and you know right well that I would not—They were all much struck by these remarks, but more so by the boldness of my manner. I thereupon proceeded to assure them that you would not take any proceedings against them, for fear of compromising me. As a proof thereof, I offered to come to your house to-day and obtain from you these hundred guineas for them. These assurances satisfied the whole party, the Hangman's mistress alone excepted. Three of the men have now accompanied me as far as your door, and are waiting at this moment in the street. You see, therefore," added Nell Gibson, with that calmness which was her *outward* characteristic, "how true I spoke when I declared that it was impossible to escape from the trammels of crime and the meshes of such companionship."

Thus ended the colloquy between this young woman and her seducer. She received the hundred guineas for which she had called; but again did she emphatically decline any boon or gift for herself. The Baronet accompanied her as far as the front door of his house; and standing upon the threshold for a few minutes to look after her, he observed by the light of the lamps that she joined three men at the corner of the street.

"Women are strange creatures!" thought the Baronet to himself, as he retraced his way to his own cheerful fireside.

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

MORE PLOTTING AND COUNTER

PLOTTING.

The three men whom Nell Gibson thus joined, were the Buttoner, Bencull, and the Hangman; and passing rapidly away from the fashionable street where Sir Douglas Huntingdon lived, they plunged into a low district in the close vicinity. For be it observed that in London the back windows of the palaces of the rich often look upon the noisome dens where the poor—their victims—dwell.

Entering a vile public house, or boozing-ken, the three men and Nell Gibson proceeded to the taproom: and as there was

no one else there at the time, they were enabled to converse at their ease.

"Now, Nell," said the Buttoner, as soon as an order had been given for some liquor "what news? I suppose you succeeded with your pal, the Baronet."

"Here is the money," she observed, quietly producing gold and Bank notes for a hundred guineas.

"And you couldn't get no more out of him?" observed Bencull, savagely.

"Not a farthing," answered Nell Gibson. "I had a great deal of difficulty in getting this."

"Then he was deuced ungrateful," said the Hangman, "after all you did for him last night."

"Yes—very," replied the young woman.

"And didn't you learn nothink about that sweet young gal," demanded Bencull.

"Only that Sir Douglas, on ascertaining who she was, restored her to her friends;"—and in giving this answer Nell Gibson was prompted by the same feeling which had inspired her conduct throughout towards the Baronet—namely, to do nothing that should in any way injure or annoy him, but on the contrary anything she could to serve him.

"Well, this is perving," exclaimed Bencull—"to lose that young gal after all the trouble I had in getting possession of her! But there's one more question—and that is, whether there's any chance of a safe crack in the Baronet's house?"

"Eh! that's the question," said the Hangman, instinctively tapping his capacious pocket to show that he had his burglarious apparatus concealed about his person.

"I examined the hall well, as I went in and came out," said Nell Gibson; "but I don't think that an entry can be made in that quarter. In fact, I scarce think from what I saw that it would be worth while to attempt it at all."

"Now mind you, I think just the contrary," cried the Hangman, with an oath: for he had been watching Nell Gibson's countenance from under his overhanging brows, and he felt convinced in his own mind that she was doing all she could to shield the Baronet.

"I say let us try the crack," exclaimed the Buttoner, sharing the Hangman's suspicions.

"And I say," added Bencull, "that if I do it alone, it shall be done. There's a coach-house and stable adjoining the Baronet's mansion: and we can easily get through that way to the back of the premises. Then, when once at the back of a

house, I should like to see the doors or windows that would keep me out."

"Well then, it's agreed," said the Hangman. "Let me see," he continued, looking at a great silver watch which he pulled from his fob; "it's now half past ten o'clock. We will wait here till twelve—and that shall be the hour. The lush is good at this ken, and the landlord knows me."

"Will you stay here, then, Nell?" inquired the Buttoner; "or go home to Bermondsey and get to bed comfortable, while I stay to do the trick?"

"Just as you like?" answered Nell, with apparent indifference: though in her heart she was most anxious to get away at once.

"Well then," said the Buttoner, also affecting the utmost carelessness in the matter, "I should think you had better get home as quick as you can."

"So be it," said Nell Gibson, rising from her seat; then, with a laugh, she observed to her paramour the Buttoner, "Mind in dividin' that swag you remember my regulars:"—and she pointed to the money on the table.

"All right, Nell," said the Buttoner; and the young woman then took her departure.

"What did you let her go for?" demanded the Hangman, savagely, the moment the door closed behind her. "Curse me if I don't think she's been playing us false again with this Baronet——"

"That's just my opinion," interrupted the Buttoner, starting from his seat: "and it's cos why I think so that I persuaded her to be off so that I may have an opportunity of watching her. I shall be back at midnight at all events, if not sooner."

Having thus spoken, he turned up the collar of his coat, slouched his hat over his countenance, then hastened from the boozing-ken. On emerging into the street, he caught a glimpse of Nell Gibson by the light of a lamp, just as she was turning round the corner: and having once got upon the right track, he had no difficulty in keeping her in view,—still leaving such a distance between them as to prevent her from perceiving that she was thus dogged. At first however, she kept halting, turning round, looking and listening, every two or three minutes: but at length, being perfectly satisfied that there was no watch set upon her, she increased her pace, and made straight for the Almonry in Westminster, which was about a mile from the boozing-ken she had so recently left.

The Almonry is one of those dreadful

neighbourhoods where pauperism is most intense, squalor most hideous, demoralization most depraved. It consists chiefly of brothels and such like dens of infamy, and forms part of the domain belonging as an endowment to Westminster Abbey! But inasmuch as loathsome hot-beds of vice and moral lazar-houses of that kind usually produced a good rent, the Dean and Chapter could not of course think of purging a neighbourhood which yielded them such large revenues.

In the midst of that morass so densely peopled with human reptiles, and exhaling so pestilential an atmosphere, was situated a low boozing-ken known as Meg Blowen's crib. It differed from Bencull's establishment in Jacob's Island, inasmuch as it had not the appearance of a private dwelling, but was open like any other public-house, and had a large room on the ground-floor always filled at night with the vilest of the vile and the lowest of the low.

To this place did Nell Gibson wend her way,—the Buttoner still following at a distance. Entering the establishment, she tarried for a few minutes in the public room to exchange some friendly observations with her acquaintances there: and having thus dispensed her courtesies to the leading members of the gang, she passed into Meg Blowen's—that is to say, the landlady's—private room behind the bar. If we follow her thither and peep in at her proceedings, we shall observe that she requested to be furnished with pen, ink, and paper; and having written a letter, she summoned into her presence a lad whom she believed to be the most trustworthy amongst the juvenile portion of reprobates there assembled. Making him secure about his person the letter which she had written, she bade him hasten and deliver it at an address which she named, and to depart from the house the moment he placed the letter in the hands of the servant answering the door. Having thus explicitly given her instructions, she placed five shillings in the lad's hands: and he set forth with great glee to execute his commission.

But to return to the Buttoner, we must observe that on seeing Nell Gibson enter Meg Blowen's he was more than ever convinced she had some artifice in view: and looking through the window, he first saw converse with her acquaintances in the public room, and then pass into the private parlour behind the bar. He next saw Meg Blowen reach down the pen and ink from a shelf, take a sheet of paper out of a drawer and they carry these writing

materials into the parlour. It would have struck any individual even far less astute than the Buttoner, that Nell Gibson was going to send a written communication somewhere: and he therefore remained intently upon the watch. In a few minutes he saw Nell Gibson appear at the door of the parlour, cast her eyes searchingly around upon the motley assemblage, and select one of the lads. The youth singled out was (as already stated, summoned by her into the parlour: and in a short time he reappeared. But instead of rejoining his companions at the table in the public room, he at once issued forth from the establishment.

The Buttoner followed him until they were at a convenient distance from the place: then looking back and perceiving the coast was clear, he overtook the boy, and clutching him by the collar, said, in a fierce tone, "Now, my lad, a word with you."

"Holloa! Mister Buttoner," exclaimed the youth, catching a glimpse of the man's countenance by the light gleaming from a window. "What do you mean by stopping me like this here?"

"Oh! you know me, do you, young feller?" cried the Buttoner. "Well so much the better: we shall sooner come to an understanding. Now then, you have nothing to fear; because I shall let you keep whatever the young woman has just given you, and I will give you double myself into the bargain."

"Well, she gived me a guinea," said the boy, prompt with a lie and ready with a cheat.

"Wery good," observed the Buttoner. "Then of course you can show it me?"

"Won't you take a gentleman's word?" asked the lad impudently.

"No nonsense," responded the Buttoner, bestowing a hearty shake upon the youth, "Come, show us what Nell Gibson gave yer—and I'll double it."

"Well, by goles! it's turned into a crown," said the boy, producing a five-shilling piece. "It's the reg'lar counterfeit crank she's come over me!"

"Nonsense," interrupted the Buttoner: then pulling a handful of silver from his pocket, and counting out ten shillings, he said, "Now give me the letter you've got about you—walk about for half-an-hour or so—and go back and tell the young woman that you've done her commission quite faithful."

The ten shillings chinked in the boy's hand—the Buttoner grasped the letter—and they separated,—the latter returning

to the boozing-ken where he had left the Hangman and Bencull. In a few hasty words he explained to them all that had occurred: and on opening the letter, which was addressed to Sir Douglas Huntingdon the contents were found to be as follow:—

"Look well to your premises to-night. A burglary is contemplated by some of the men you saw at the hut on Shooter's Hill, I said all I could to prevent this further annoyance towards you; but I could not succeed in staving it off. I am very much afraid that they suspected I was playing a part; if so, all these causes of suspicion will make it go hard with me sooner or later. But no matter: whatever is to happen must take its course. I would have come back to warn you of the attempt that will be made; but I am so fearful that one of the men might go and watch the street. So I prefer writing, and have found a trusty messenger. I think the men will enter by the coach-house and get round to the back of the premises: but you must keep us tech at all points. One thing however I conjure you—that is not to adopt any means to take them into custody, nor yet to do them any unnecessary hurt: only just to defend and protect yourself. This is most likely the last time you will ever hear of or from.

"ELLEN."

The rage of the Hangman, Bencull, and the Buttoner, on reading this epistle, may be better conceived than described. Daniel Coffin muttered such awful threats against the young woman, that if his two companions had not been kindred fiends, their blood would have run cold. But when the first ebullition of their diabolical wrath was expended, they agreed after calmer and cooler deliberation, to conceal for the present their knowledge of this additional treachery on Nell Gibson's part, with a view to ascertain by some means or other whether she were also betraying them in respect to the plot initiated against Larry Sampson.

By the time this resolution was fairly discussed and adopted by the three villains, the Hangman's watch showed that it was midnight. They accordingly tossed off bumpers of brandy to drink success to their undertaking; and thus inspired with a more than natural amount of brute courage, they repaired in the direction of Sir Douglas Huntingdon's mansion.

Although the street where the house was situated was a fashionable one, it was no great thoroughfare; and by the aid of the Hangman's skeleton keys the coach-

house door was soon opened. The three ruffians, having thus let themselves into this portion of the establishment, looked the door behind them, and then proceeded to light a "darkey," or lantern, which also formed part of the invariable tackle of a cracksmen. In the rear of the coach-house were the stables, in which there were several horses; and there was a door behind, leading into a yard at the back of the house. The three burglars accordingly entered the stable for the purpose of passing through by the way described: but two of the horses exhibited such manifestations of terror by kicking and plunging, as if instinctively aware of the presence of intruders, that a groom who slept in a chamber above the coach-house was aroused from his repose.

Leaping from his bed, and arming himself with a pair of pistols, the groom sprang down the ladder leading to his chamber: but he was instantaneously seized by the three burglars, against whom he made a desperate resistance. The lantern was dashed out of the Hangman's hand, and the glass broken against the wall: it then fell upon a heap of straw, the light remaining unextinguished. The same blow which dashed the lantern from Coffin's hand knocked him violently down; and he lay half-stunned upon the floor for nearly a minute, during which Bencull and the Buttoner succeeded in overpowering the groom.

"Let's give him his gruel, Ben," cried the Buttoner, as they both dashed the unfortunate man with all their strength against the wall; so that he groaned heavily once and then fell—lying motionless, either dead or else stunned beyond all hope of recovery.

But scarcely was this crime accomplished, when the sudden blazing of the straw on which the lantern had fallen, startled the burglars. From the Buttoner's lips burst the cry of "Fire!"—the Hangman who had just recovered his senses, sprang as if galvanized to his feet;—and Bencull at once began to throw pails of water upon the burning material, there being a pump in the coach-house. But this endeavour to extinguish the flame speedily proving utterly ineffectual, the three burglars were compelled to depart as stealthily and promptly as they could.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon has not as yet retired to rest. The story which he had heard from the lips of his housekeeper relative to the troubles of Theodore and Ariadne Varian—together with the singular and touching features of his inter-

view with Nell Gibson,—had furnished him with so much food for reflection that he remained sitting by his cheerful fireside, lost in serious meditation. All the rest of the household had retired to their chambers: a profound stillness reigned through the house; and not a sound reached his ears from without. But all on a sudden this dead, deep silence—this awe-inspiring solemnity of the mid-night hour—was broken by that most terrible of all alarms, the cry of "Fire!"

Startled from his reflections as if by the voice of doom thundering in his ear, and springing from his seat as if stung by an adder, Sir Douglas Huntingdon rushed from the room and bounded forth to the front door to ascertain whether the alarm were real and where the fire was. In an instant he acquired the dreadful certainty that it was neither a cruel jest nor a false rumour; for the moment he opened the front door, the vivid light flashed upon his eyes, and he beheld the flames bursting forth from the windows of the rooms above the coach-house. Already, too, were crowds hurrying thither—the alarm spreading to the neighbouring dwellings—and all the usual features of such a scene were manifesting themselves in their variety, confusion, and excitement.

Several persons sprang towards Sir Douglas—some proffering their advice—others demanding how many people slept in his house, and in which rooms they were. In a moment he was overwhelmed with multitudinous questions and bewildered with conflicting counsels. Then came a couple of watchmen springing their rattles: next appeared three or four hulking fellows bearing along a ladder and knocking down all who got in their way—and all this while the crowd was collecting and the flames were bursting forth with increasing fury.

But Sir Douglas Huntingdon soon recovered his presence of mind: and rushing back into the house he raised the fearful alarm of *fire*, which did not appear as to have reached the ears of any inmate save himself. In a few moments all was bustle, confusion, and dismay within the walls of the mansion. Mrs. Banies came rushing down in her night-clothes; and overcome with terror, she fainted in the hall. Some of the other servants soon made their appearance also; as the flames had now spread from the coach-house to the mansion itself, several active persons amongst the crowd began rapidly to remove all the most portable articles of furniture into the street. The ladder was

raised against the front of the house in case of need, to facilitate escape from the upper storey's: and messengers were despatched for a fire-engine.

Meantime the Baronet, struck with horror at the idea that his groom slept over the coach-house,—and having satisfied himself that the other servants were all safe,—rushed to the back of the premises and opened the door leading from the yard to the stable. Several persons followed him: but the instant that stable door was opened, two or three of the horses sprang madly forth, trampling down those who were in their way. Sir Douglas himself was thus much hurt by one of the affrighted animals: but rushing forward, he sought to penetrate into the stable. A volume of flame, bursting forth, drove him back;—and to his horror he heard the piteous sounds of dying agony which proved that several of his horses were perishing in the flames. But the groom—the poor unfortunate groom—where was he? Again did Sir Douglas spring forward in order to penetrate into the coach-house: but again did a volume of smoke drive him back. A third time did he make the attempt;—and now the ceiling of coach-house and stable fell in with a terrific crash;—and if two of the men who had followed the Baronet hither had not suddenly pulled him back as they heard the rafters giving way, he would have been buried in the ruins.

For a few moments the flames seemed stifled in this part of the premises: but as a long tongue of fire suddenly shot up, lambent and lurid again, the Baronet observed by the light that the fall of the ceiling had brought down with it a considerable portion of the partition-wall separating the stabling department from the mansion itself. A large portion of the interior of the dwelling-house was thus revealed, including a back-staircase leading up to the bed-chambers.

At this moment the recollection flashed to the Baronet's mind that he had not ore now seen Ariadne Varian amongst the other inmates of the mansion whose safety was assured. Indeed, the poor girl had been forgotten: Mrs. Banies had swooned, as already stated, and had been borne to a neighbour's house where she fell into alarming hysterics: and, on the other hand, Sir Douglas Huntingdon's attention had been mainly directed towards the coach-house and stabling. Thus was it that the only two persons who were likely to think of poor Ariadne, were prevented by circumstances from doing so, until the

sudden laying bare of the private staircase to the view of the Baronet, led him to pass in rapid array in his mind every chamber to which that staircase led.

The instant that the image of Ariadne thus flashed to his recollection, he gave utterance to a cry of mingled anguish and despair: then springing forward, he clambered through the vast aperture which the falling in of the partition wall had caused; and he thus gained the interior of the dwelling-house. Passing into the hall, he found his servants and many strangers busy in removing the furniture. He made rapid inquiries concerning Ariadne; but the servants had forgotten her, and the strangers had seen no young damsel answering to her description descend the stairs.

Horrible uncertainty! All the upper part of the house was in a perfect conflagration: the street was as light as if it were daytime;—and one wretched engine was making the most ineffectual attempts to quench the fire. The ladder itself had caught the flames gushing forth from the upper windows. And here we may observe that the crows augmented: and amongst them were the Hangman, Bencull, and the Buttoner, all there hovering about to see what piece of good luck the chapter of accidents might throw in the way.

From all that has been said, hurried and brief though the description be, the reader will understand that the flames had spread like wild-fire in an incredibly short space of time. Catching the chambers above the coach-house they had thence burst into the mansion, all the upper part of which was now enveloped in a terrific blaze. To ascend therefore to the rooms above, appeared an act of frenzy or of desperation. But Ariadne's life was at stake: and this thought was sufficient to nerve the Baronet with the strength and courage of a thousand!

Retracing his way from the hall to the back staircase, he rushed up it. It was the same as a besieger scaling the walls of a town, while all kinds of igneous missiles and combustibles are showered down upon him. Sir Douglas had literally to ascend through gushing flames that scorched and smoke that blinded; but he was resolved to rescue Ariadne, or perish in the attempt! In a few seconds he reached her chamber-door. Bursting it open, he beheld her lying senseless on the carpet. Through the wainscotted wall the flames were already gushing: the heat was intense,—the smoke stifling. In less than a minute the maiden would have been suffocated—

whereas she was as yet unscathed by the fire, and had most probably fainted through terror when endeavouring to escape from her room on the first alarm of fire.

To snatch her up in his arms and bear her forth, was the work of a moment. Her head dropped back upon the Baronet's shoulder: and she continued senseless as he rushed with her down the staircase. Rushed indeed!—it was plunging as it were into a fiery furnace: and rapid as the lightning-flash did the thought sweep through the Baronet's mind that it would be a miracle if he and his fair burden reached the street in safety. Vast masses of the partition wall kept falling in; and it seemed as if the whole building were about to give way and bury himself and Ariadne in the smoking, burning ruins. Great pieces of timber—especially rude planks belonging to the lofts above the stables—came crashing down: and thus, in the space of three or four short minutes, did the Baronet and the unconscious Ariadne pass through countless perils of an appalling character. But at length the damsel's brave deliverer reached the foot of the staircase: and as he rushed with his burthen through the hall and appeared with her at the street door, a tremendous shout of applause arose from the assembled multitudes.

At the very instant that Sir Douglas Huntingdon thus reached the threshold of the mansion with the still inanimate Ariadne in his arms, and in the strong glare of the terrific conflagration the maiden was recognised by Bencull. This discovery of the *fair stranger of the hut* was in a moment communicated by the ruffian in a hurried whisper to the Buttoner and the Hangman: and they all three instinctively pressed forward towards the front-door steps. At that very instant Sir Douglas Huntingdon felt a sudden faintness come over him,—doubtless in consequence of the tremendous excitement as well as painful exertions through which he had just passed.

"Who will take care of this young lady?" he cried, as one of his footmen threw an ample cloak over the half-naked form of Ariadne.

But scarcely were the words spoken by the Baronet, when some large portion of the interior of the mansion fell in with such a terrific crash that the crowd retreated in sudden dismay and with cries of alarm: while those who were removing the furniture, rushed out of the house with such haste that the Baronet was thrown violently forward. In that mo-

ment of confusion, Bencull caught Ariadne Varian in his arms: and as if it were written in the book of destiny that circumstances were to favour the ruffian's design in carrying off the still inanimate maiden the whole roof of the house fell in at the very instant that he seized upon her. The consequence was that the fire was extinguished, or rather smothered, for the moment as completely as if a deluge of water were poured upon it: and darkness fell upon the scene—a darkness all the more intense through succeeding the glare of the conflagration. Confusion became worse confounded amongst the crowd: and while the whole living mass fell back from the vicinage of the falling house, as the sea sweeps away from the shore upon which it has just dashed its boiling billows, it was no difficult matter for Bencull to hurry away with Ariadne in his arms. The Hangman and the Buttoner kept close at his heels—an empty hackney-coach was encountered at the corner of the street—and the three villains entered it with their lovely burden.

But when the driver asked whither he was to go, the men were thrown into a sudden perplexity. Bencull, however, hastily whispered, "Didn't Nell Gibson talk of a certain Marquis of Leveson who was Mrs. Gale's best customer?"

"To be sure," whispered the Buttoner. "Why not take her direct to him?"

"Ah! do you think of selling her to that Marquis?" said the Hangman. "Well, I know where he lives—I have been in his house:"—then turning to the coachman who stood at the door, and thrusting some silver into his hand, Daniel Coffin ordered him to drive to Albemarle Street.

In a few minutes the vehicle stopped at the door of Leveson House: and it happened that just at the same moment Brockman, the favourite valet of the Marquis, was entering the mansion. Seeing the hackney-coach stop, he inquired of those inside what their business was: and as it was pitch dark within the vehicle, the valet did not observe how villainous were the countenances of the fellows whom he thus addressed.

"The fact is," said the Hangman in a rapid whisper, "we have got a young gal that is intended for his lordship. She's in a fit: and so you can just lift her into the house without fearing any noise—and one of us will call for the recompense the first thing to-morrow morning."

Brockman naturally concluded from this statement that the fellows had been hired

by his master, or else by some one in his lordship's interest, to perform this particular service: and he therefore at once consented to receive the maiden without asking another question. The housekeeper who was sitting up for Brockman, was summoned: and with her aid the valet lifted Ariadne out of the coach and carried her into the mansion.

The vehicle then drove away, the three ruffians congratulating themselves not only on having done something to annoy Sir Douglas Huntingdon, whom they regarded, as a sort of enemy, but likewise on having adopted so bold a step as to convey the damsel direct to the spot where her charms were marketable, instead of conducting the bargain through the medium of a middle-woman, such as Mrs. Gale. But not for a moment did those ruffians experience the slightest remorse for having caused so terrible a conflagration in that house beneath the ruins of which the charred and blackened remains of the unfortunate groom were indubitably buried.

Meantime Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who had been thrown down and stunned by the rush of people from the front door of his mansion, was borne to a neighbour's house, where immediate restoratives were applied. On coming to himself his first inquiry was for Ariadne: but those by whom he was surrounded, could give him no information on the subject. Supposing that she had been taken to some other house in the vicinage, he sallied forth into the street again to make further inquiries on the subject. But neither from his own servants, who were watching over the property removed out of the house—nor from any of the crowd—could he obtain a satisfactory answer. In fact, no tidings could he glean of Ariadne from the moment that he sank down insensible in front of his own door.

Tortured with cruel misgivings, he sped from house to house prosecuting his inquiries, up and down the street—but all in vain. At length he was compelled, through sheer exhaustion, to abandon any farther research for the present, and retire to a neighbouring hotel where he took up his temporary quarters.

CHAPTER LXXXV.

ANOTHER LAMB IN THE LION'S DEN.

On recovering her sense, Ariadne Varian found herself in bed; and sweeping her eyes rapidly around, as a flood of

recollections poured in unto her brain, she at once saw that it was not the same chamber which she had occupied at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. Handsome as that chamber was, this was far more elegantly furnished, and denoted a more exquisite refinement in taste or rather in luxury.

A middle aged woman, looking like a housekeeper, was seated by the bedside: and though the instant Ariadne opened her eyes, this female endeavoured to look kindly and speak soothingly, yet it was not with the same motherly tenderness evinced by Mrs. Baines.

No suspicion of treachery, however, entered Ariadne's mind. Collecting her ideas, she remembered that she had been alarmed with cries of "Fire"—that springing from her couch she had beheld the ominous glare at the window of her chamber—and that the noise of the gathering crowds in the streets had reached her ears. She also recollected that, overcome with terror, she had felt her limbs failing and her strength abandoning her; and as she remembered nothing more until the instant she awoke in this strange apartment where she now found herself, she naturally concluded that her reminiscences had been interrupted by a long swoon.

Utterly unaware, therefore, how her life was saved, and who had saved it,—unconscious, indeed of every feature and detail of the terrible conflagration,—her first hurried questions were to inquire where she was, what extent of damage had been done, and whether any lives were lost. Then before even a single one of these queries was answered, she exclaimed with looks and accents of torturing suspense "Tell me, is Sir Douglas Huntingdon safe?"

The question so hurriedly and excitedly put were each and all equally puzzling to the Marquis of Loveson's housekeeper, who was even more ignorant that Ariadne herself relative to what had occurred—seeing that she of course did not know the damsel was, whence she had been brought, or that any particular house had been on fire. Being however of an astute and cunning disposition as the housekeeper of such a nobleman ought to be, the woman gave Ariadne such vague and general, but at the same time reassuring answers, that while she tranquillized the maiden's mind on the one hand, she elicited on the other fresh questions which in themselves were explanations of what had occurred.

"You assure me, then that my kind-

hearted benefactor, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, is safe?" said Ariadne.

"Yes—quite safe."

"Is the house totally consumed? and am I indebted to a neighbour's hospitality for this asylum?"

"I am afraid the damage is great—and you are freely welcome here."

"Was it the Baronet who saved me?" inquired Ariadne, secretly wishing in her heart that the response would be in the affirmative.

"Yes—he rescued you. You were senseless, I suppose?"

"I had fainted through terror the moment I heard the alarm of fire."

"Ah! poor young lady, and enough too to frighten you! I presume you are some relation to Sir Douglas Huntingdon?"

"Not the least," returned Ariadne.

"He is my benefactor—that is to say, he has behaved handsomely, kindly, and nobly towards me, although I have only known him for I may say a few hours—indeed since last night. But this reminds me that his excellent housekeeper, Mrs Baines, has behaved like a mother to me; do you know whether she is quite safe?"

"I have already told you," answered Lord Leveson's housekeeper, "that no lives have been lost."

"Is Mrs. Baines here in this house?"

"No—but at a neighbour's."

"Ah! I understand," said Ariadne: "when so dreadful an occurrence as a fire takes place, in a house, the inmates speedily become dispersed throughout the neighbourhood."

"Yes—that is always the case."

"And now tell me beneath whose roof I have found an asylum!" asked Ariadne.

"Have you ever heard of a nobleman named Leveson—the Marquis of Leveson?" inquired the housekeeper, with becoming caution.

"No, never—Oh! yes—I answered too hastily," said Ariadne, suddenly correcting herself, as she remembered having read that the Mr. Dysart who was hung a short time back was the husband of the Marquis of Leveson's niece. "I have heard his lordship's name mention, now that I think of it—but quite in a casual manner!"

"Well, then, should you be pleased or otherwise," asked the housekeeper, "if you heard that you were beneath the roof of the Marquis of Leveson?"

"I should esteem myself highly honoured," returned Ariadne, with that simplicity of prejudice in favour of the aristocracy which was natural with one who had never been taught either by lessons or by ex-

perience, to loath, hate, and abominate that aristocracy as the greatest curse that God in his wrath or Satan in his malignity ever inflicted upon a country.

"Well, then," said the housekeeper "this is the mansion of the Marquis of Leveson: and I occupy an important post in his lordship's household. His lordship is an excellent man, and I am sure that you will like him amazingly when you come to know him. Besides which, he is certain to feel a great interest in you after your adventure of this night. And then, too, there is his beautiful niece Lady Ernestina Dysart—one of the handsomest and finest women in England. Ah! how unfortunate she has been," added the housekeeper, shaking her head with much apparent solemnity.

"Yes, I know to what you allude," said Ariadne, with a profound sigh, as the thought of Dysart's fate, by a natural association, conjured up ideas of Newgate, and forcibly reminded her of her brother Theodore's recent misfortunes. "It was when reading certain circumstances in the Newspaper that I first became acquainted with the name of the Marquis of Leveson."

"Well, my dear young lady," said the housekeeper, "I need not tell you that it was a sad and shocking blow for his lordship and his lordship's niece. But I see that I must not chatter in this way to you any longer. Pray compose yourself to rest. I will leave a light in your room: and on this table by your bedside you will find cordials restoratives, and various kinds of refreshment, should you feel exhausted or faint. I will visit you early in the morning and hope to learn that you have slept off the effects of the alarm and nervousness produced by the fire."

The housekeeper then withdrew: and Ariadne speedily sank into a profound slumber, little suspecting into what a maze of perils she had been so perfidiously betrayed.

The first thing in the morning Brockman acquainted the Marquis with the arrival of a young lady in the middle of the night; and as the valet had been conversing with the housekeeper only a few minutes before he repaired to his master's chamber, he had gleaned from her lips all that she herself had gleaned from Ariadne's. The Marquis of Leveson was unfeignedly astonished when he heard of this arrival: and Brockman saw at once that his master had really *not* expected any such occurrence.

But while they were still deliberating

upon the event, and the valet was explaining to the Marquis how the fair stranger had spoken of Sir Douglas Huntingdon and the fire which had occurred at his house, a footman knocked at the door to announce that a man, who declined giving his name, solicited an immediate audience of his lordship. That this was one of the men who had brought the fair stranger to the mansion during the night, was presumable: and the Marquis, anxious to learn more of the matter, at once proceeded to the room where the individual was waiting.

The visitor was none other than the Hangman, dressed out in his very best apparel: but his ill-favoured countenance and sinister look were not much improved by the advantages of a Sunday garb. However, the Marquis did not expect to encounter an elegant gentleman in the individual who had brought the fair stranger to his house: but at the same time he little suspected that the ruffian who now stood in his presence was the Public Executioner—the man who had been admitted into the joint confidence of his niece Ernestina and the Prince Regent relative to the affair of the deceased Paul Dysart!

"Well, and what is your business?" inquired the nobleman.

"I called about the young girl that me and a couple of pals of mine left her last night," said the Hangman, with the most brazen effrontery.

"And pray," demanded the Marquis, assuming a stern look,—“what made you bring that young female hither?”

"You see, my lord," replied Daniel Coffin, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon's house was burnt to the ground during the past night. Me and my pals happened to be mingling quite promiscuous in the crowd that the fire collected; and, lo and behold! the Baronet brought down a young lady in his arms, half naked and in a fainting state. So seeing that she was beautiful as an angel, we got possession of her—whipped her into a coach—and brought her here—"

"But why did you bring her hither?" demanded the Marquis; "that is the point I want you to clear up."

"Oh! there's no gammon about me, my lord," exclaimed Coffin, "The fact is, I've been in those secret chambers of your lordship's, and have looked at all the pretty thing in the shape of statues and paintings—"

"Ah," ejaculated the nobleman, the truth flashing to his comprehension. "Then you are—"

"Dan'el Coffin, at your ladyship's

service" was the reply, "if your lordship wants references," added the fellow, with cool self-sufficiency, "I can give 'em either to Lady Ernestina or the Prince Regent."

"Well, I know now who you are and all about to conceal the sensation of utter loathing which he experienced as he gazed upon the public executioner. "In plain terms, then, you fancied that in consequence of having seen my private apartments, you would not be doing wrong in bringing the young girl to me?"

"That's just what it is, my lord," answered the Hangman.

"But do you know who she is?" inquired the Marquis: "what is her station in life—is she the mistress of Sir Douglas Huntingdon—a relative—or a servant? In fact, tell me all about her."

"She's not a servant, but looks like a very genteel young person—almost a lady, I should say. But one thing is very certain—she's *not* the Baronet's mistress for I happen to know that she hasn't even known him many hours."

"But a few minutes are enough to ruin a woman's virtue—let alone a few hours," said the Marquis. "However, that is of little consequence, since, the girl is really beautiful. And now after all you have said, do you mean me to understand that you are not well acquainted with her? Of course you are! What is her name?"

"I can't tell your lordship—I know no more than Adam," was the reply. "The fact is, in a few words, me and my pals were at Shooter's Hill on a little business the night before last; and Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who was travelling that way, fell into our hands. Within the same hour, another accident also threw this young lady in our way: and to be brief, they both succeeded in effecting their escape and getting off together. So it was natural that the Baronet should give the young girl an asylum: and that's the way she came to be at his house. But hasn't your lordship seen her yet!"

"Not yet. I am however told that she is really very beautiful," observed the Marquis.

"Beautiful!" cried the Hangman, with a diabolical leer: "she's so sweetly pretty that if I hadn't thought your lordship would give a good price for her, I should have kept her for myself. I don't know much of these matters: but I must say that you need only look in her face to see that she's innocence itself."

"Well, and so now you are come for your reward said the Marquis. What do you expect?"

"Fifty guineas won't hurt your lordship," answered the Hangman.

"There—take that," said the Marquis throwing down his purse, which he knew contained more than the sum demanded.

Daniel Coffin picked up the purse from the table where the nobleman had tossed it, and then took his departure, well pleased with the success of the visit.

CHAPTER LXXXVI.

A CATASTROPHE.

The chamber to which Ariadne Varian had been consigned at Leveson's House, was the one that communicated with the dressing-room whence a secret-door opened into the private suite of apartments already so often referred to in our narrative. This bed-chamber sometimes occupied by the Marquis himself; but he has frequently slept in a room on a higher story, for the sake of the convenience offered by contiguous baths. Thus, on the particular occasion now referred to, the nobleman had spent the night in this last mentioned chamber: and therefore was it that the housekeeper, with fiendish forethought, consigned Ariadne to the one whence the communication led to the private suite of apartments.

On awaking after some hours of refreshing sleep, Ariadne recalled to mind everything that had occurred during the past night: but still it was without the slightest misgiving or suspicion she remembered that she was now beneath the roof of the Marquis of Leveson.

While she was thus collecting her ideas, the housekeeper entered the room, bearing a tray, containing the young maiden's breakfast.

"It is very late?" inquired Ariadne, fancying that she must have slept a long time,

"It is a little past ten o'clock," replied the housekeeper: "but you will do well to take your breakfast in bed as you have passed through so much excitement and alarm during the past night. Moreover, you have no apparel of any kind here—and I must see about getting some clothes presently. His lordship will come and pay you a visit immediately, and will then confer with you on your plans and prospects."

"What, here!" ejaculated Ariadne, surprised at the remark in conceiving that she had not properly understood it.

"And why not?" asked the housekeeper, with a smile, "The Marquis is old enough to be your father: indeed you are a mere child to him. Moreover, I am going to remain here with you, my love!"

Still Ariadne experienced a secret displeasure at the idea of a stranger visiting her bed-room. Her pure-mindedness and natural delicacy shrank from the thought, but she scarcely dared to venture any farther remonstrance, as she felt that she was under great obligations to those who had given her an asylum beneath that roof. Besides which, as she had no garments to put on—not a stitch nor rag in the whole world beyond the night-drapery that she wore—she could not rise and dress herself to receive the Marquis; and it was natural that he should wish to know whom he had beneath his roof. But this reflection suddenly gave rise to another: namely, what account could she render of herself?—what name should she pass by? To refuse all replies to the questions that might be put, would seem not only suspicious but rude to a degree; and yet, on the other hand, how could she tell the truth?—how announce the name of Ariadne Varian? Ah! the poor girl was indeed unused to the arts of deceit and unskilled in the ways of duplicity.

She was sitting up in bed, pondering mournfully upon these points, and partaking of some chocolate which the housekeeper had poured out for her, when a gentle knock was heard at the door. The housekeeper at once opened it; and the Marquis entered the room. Ariadne instinctively shrank beneath the bed-clothes, while her cheeks were suffused with blushes.

"How is the fair guest with whose presence circumstances have thus honoured me?" said the Marquis, assuming his softest voice and blandest manner. "Really the incidents which have thus brought you, young lady, within these walls are so romantic, that they invest you with additional charms."

Ariadne said nothing: she was overwhelmed with confusion. But averting her blushing countenance, she felt such strange sensations come over her—sensations of mingled alarm, outraged modesty, and bitter annoyance—that she was ready to burst into tears.

"You are welcome to my house, young lady," resumed the Marquis,—"most welcome! Indeed the longer you grace it with your presence, the happier I shall feel. My excellent housekeeper here will

see that your slightest wants shall not merely be attended to, but even anticipated—"

"I thank your lordship," murmured Ariadne, now recovering the power of utterance: but I shall not intrude on your lordship's hospitality much longer. Indeed if your lordship's housekeeper will only be kind enough to furnish me with apparel, I shall at once prepare to take my departure," she added, her sense of violated decency now triumphing over her fears and imparting firmness to her tone.

"Well, well, my dear young lady—you are your own mistress, no doubt," said the Marquis, believing Ariadne's conduct to be nothing more nor less than mere affectation: for he could not fancy that it was possible for her to have passed even a few short hours in the dwelling of Sir Douglas Huntingdon and have come forth pure and chaste. "But methinks that this precipitation on your part to leave my mansion, where there is every disposition to treat you kindly——"

"My lord," interrupted Ariadne, now turning her eyes towards the Marquis while her countenance was flushed with indignation: "I know not what may be the manners and customs of fashionable life; but in the sphere to which I belong, your presence in my chamber would not only be deemed a violation of all the rules of hospitality, but a positive outrage and insult."

"Upon my honour, you take my conduct most unkindly!" exclaimed the Marquis. "But I will withdraw for the present, since you appear to wish it."

He then quitted the room, making a rapid sign to the housekeeper: and the moment the door closed behind him Ariadne burst into a flood of tears.

"My dear girl, don't take on like this," said the housekeeper. "Why, I am really surprised at you! His lordship did not mean any offence—how could he? He perhaps spoke in rather an off hand manner: but then that was his familiarity of tone towards one in whom he felt interested. I can assure you that the Marquis is generosity and liberality personified. If you asked him for any boon on which you set your mind, you would have it. And young ladies have their little whims and caprices, you know——"

"Good heavens! what means this strange language?" cried Ariadne, all the suspicions and misgivings which within the last few minutes had been aroused in her mind now becoming excited to a

painful degree. "If you really wish to befriend me——"

"What can I do, young lady? Speak!"

"Procure me some apparel. I cannot offer to recompense you at this moment: but in the course of the day—when once I shall have seen Sir Douglas Huntingdon——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the housekeeper, now perfectly convinced in her own mind that Ariadne was the Baronet's mistress. "But wherefore should you be in such haste to quit this mansion? Do you desire to return to that Sir Douglas Huntingdon of whom you have spoken?"

"I do—he is my only friend!" exclaimed Ariadne, with passionate vehemence, and not reflecting for a moment what interpretation might be put upon the manner in which she spoke of the Baronet. "But will you—will you, my good woman, procure me some fitting apparel? Surely Lady Ernestina Dysart would take compassion upon me—or one of the female servants might lend me a gown—a shawl—a bonnet—in fine, the barest necessities——"

"To be sure, my dear girl," said the housekeeper: "I will procure all you want in good time." Our "At once!" cried Ariadne, springing from the couch. "Procure me some raiment—I will dress myself with all possible haste—and will then intrude no longer——"

"Ah! you are wrong to speak of intrusion," interrupted the housekeeper. "But come into this dressing-room: here are all the requisites of the toilette—and I will soon procure you fitting apparel."

"Oh! then I shall thank you indeed!" exclaimed Ariadne, somewhat tranquillised by this assurance.

But while she was combing out her beautiful long flaxen hair in the dressing room adjoining the bed-chamber, the housekeeper took advantage of a moment when the maiden's back was turned, to touch the secret spring and open the door leading into the suite of private apartments.

"I asked you just now whether you really wished to return to Sir Douglas Huntingdon," resumed the wily woman; "and you declared that such was your desire."

"He is my benefactor—I have already told you as much," said Ariadne. "I am under obligations to him—deep obligations," she repeated with a profound sigh, as she thought of her brother to whom the Baronet had despatched his valet

James with reassuring messages and with money.

"You are wrong, young lady—you are wrong," continued the housekeeper, "to think of returning to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, when you may be so much happier at the house of the Marquis of Leveson. Behold, my dear girl—behold this splendidly furnished apartment into which the dressing-room opens," she exclaimed, drawing back the secret door. "All these rooms that you see shall be your's—with domestics to wait upon you—if you will only consent to remain here! Ah! my dear young lady, I am sure I shall not supplicate in vain!"

The amazement produced by these words overwhelmed as it were the alarm previously excited and Ariadne, desisting for a moment from the operation of combing out her hair, turned upon the woman a look so full of wonder and startled inquiry, that it even expressed her feelings more eloquently than the words to which she simultaneously gave utterance.

"Wherefore should you invite me thus to remain within these walls?—wherefore should you offer me the inducement of these elegant rooms? Indeed, what know you of me, that such a proposal should have emanated from your lips?"

"Ah! young lady," said the housekeeper adopting a tone of gentle persuasion, "did you not observe that the Marquis surveyed you with admiration! And surely, surely you will not be so cruel as to treat him with indifference or scorn?"

"Good heavens! what words are these that I hear!" exclaimed Ariadne, the colour coming and going in rapid transitions upon her cheeks. "It is impossible that this can be the house of the Marquis of Leveson!—impossible that any nobleman would have intruded into the chamber which his hospitality had afforded to a young and friendless girl!—impossible that any female in his service would dare to address me in the language which has just fallen from your lips!"

"Now, if it comes to the matter of that," exclaimed the housekeeper suddenly throwing off the mask and speaking in a tone of coarse insolence. "I don't see why you should pretend to be so very particular. Come, come young woman—here's enough of this nonsense: and I have already adopted the coaxing tone too long. I suppose you meant to sell yourself to Sir Douglas Huntingdon even if you have not done it already. But let me tell you that the Marquis of Leveson will prove more profitable to you. I saw just now by his

lordship's words that he does not regard you as the stubbornest of prudes or yet as a dragon of virtue: and I know his humour well enough to feel assured that he won't waste much time in coming to the point with you. Indeed he has only retired for a few minutes, just to give me the opportunity of being explicit with you."

A mortal paleness gradually spread itself over Ariadne's countenance, as these words smote upon her ears, carrying as it were the blight of a pestilence down into her very soul: and staggering towards a seat she sank upon it crushed and overwhelmed by a terrible consternation. A faintness seized upon her—a film spread rapidly over her eyes—and she felt that her senses were abandoning her,—when the sudden sound of a door opening and shutting recalled her to herself. Startled back as it were into complete consciousness, she threw her affrighted looks around, and perceived that she was now alone. The housekeeper had left her—and it was the sound of the outer door of the bedchamber that she had heard opening and closing so abruptly. But that door almost immediately opened again: and now it was the Marquis of Leveson who reappeared.

A scream of terror burst from the lips of Ariadne: and not only did alarm, but also a feeling of outraged modesty prompt her to fly from his presence: for he it understood that she was in a state of seminudity, having on nothing but the night-gear which left her neck and bosom all exposed. As she turned thus abruptly away from the approaching Marquis, she beheld the door which the housekeeper had left open when she displayed the handsomely furnished apartment to which it led.

"Beautiful girl!" exclaimed the Marquis catching sight of her naked charms and instantaneously inflamed by the view. "Resistance is vain!—besides, wherefore prove so coy—so cruel——"

But Ariadne had rushed forward into the apartment to which the secret door opened: and as she shut it promptly behind her, she turned round in eager search for the lock, that she might secure herself against the Marquis. But what was her surprise when she beheld nothing but the uniform and unbroken surface of the handsomely papered wall,—no lock—no handle—not even so much as a keyhole, to indicate the presence of a door! The thought flashed to her mind that she had fallen into some new snare: and overcome with a sense of terror now wrought up to an excruciating pitch, she sank down into

one of the splendid arm-chairs with which the apartment was furnished. But at the same instant did another rending scream burst from her lips, as the sharp click of the perfidious mechanism fell upon her ears, and as her arms and shoulders were clasped by the springs that started forth from the chairs!

At the same time the invisible door, by which she had entered that room, was opened—and the Marquis of Loveson made his appearance. Instantaneously shutting the door behind him, he stood feasting his eyes upon the charms of his intended victim. But, Oh! his hard heart melted not with pity as that sweet countenance was upturned with an expression so earnestly imploring, so pathetically entreating towards his own: no pity, nor remorse had he for that damsel's sake: all his ideas, all his aspirations were concentrated in the burning heat of one absorbing passion!

"My lord, my lord," murmured Ariadne "have mercy upon me!"

But as the maiden uttered these words in a dying tone, her head drooped forward—the gaspings of her breath ceased—and the palpitations of her snowy bosom were no longer perceptible.

"She has fainted," said the Marquis to himself. "But she is not the first who—"

The nobleman's reflection was suddenly cut short by a mortal alarm which seized upon him: for as he stooped down and looked at Ariadne, it suddenly struck him that she was dead!

He hastily placed his hand upon her heart: but it beat not: and the bosom which his hand thus pressed in its nudity, was as still as if death were indeed there. With a cold shudder running through his entire form, he touched the secret spring which released her from the grasp of the mechanism and lifting her in his arms he bore her back into the bed-chamber and laid her upon the couch. Still did she continue senseless; and if that were not the sleep of death, then assuredly was it a swoon of a most alarming character.

Vainly did the Marquis sprinkle her countenance with water and apply a scent-bottle to her nostrils. She moved not—her heart was still—her pulse imperceptible—and all vital colouring was disappearing from her lips. Her nails—those beautifully shaped nails, so pellucid with their roseate tint a few moments before now were becoming of a bluish appearance: and this circumstance gave a still deeper shock to the soul of the Marquis, for he

regarded it as the unmistakable sign of death!

He rang the bell—and the housekeeper answered the summons. Nothing could equal the woman's dismay on beholding Ariadne thus stretched lifeless on the couch; and the Marquis saw by the sudden horror which seized upon her what she also thought—his worst fears being then confirmed, that the maiden was indeed dead!

Almost wild with alarm, he bade the housekeeper hasten and fetch Lady Ernestina thither; and in a minute or two the woman returned accompanied by his lordship's niece. But Ernestina at once declared that all human aid was unavailing, and that the damsel was no more!

Nothing could exceed the exasperation of alarm which now reigned in that chamber. What was to be done?—how dispose of the corpse?—how account for the presence of the young female in the house at all? The Marquis paced to and fro in the chamber like a madman: the housekeeper fell upon her knees by the side of the bed, and began giving way to the bitterest lamentations;—while Lady Ernestina, conquering her emotions somewhat in the presence of the awful dilemma stood gazing upon the beautiful face of the dead revolving in her mind a thousand different schemes for the disposal of the corpse.

"Good heavens! what a calamity—what an awful calamity!" exclaimed the Marquis, wringing his hands at one moment, and then gesticulating with them frantically the next.

"Oh! it is enough to hang us all," groaned the housekeeper, "What on earth will become of us?"

"Calm yourselves, calm yourselves—I beseech you!" said Ernestina. "It is only by extreme prudence, circumspection, and caution that we shall avoid discovery—that is to say, if the occurrence *must* be concealed. But why not let it be avowed? The girl was not murdered—at least not murdered in the positive meaning of the term—"

"But there must be a coroner's inquest, and all the annoyance and dangers of an inquiry!" said the Marquis. "How am I to account for the girl being here?—under what circumstances am I to say she died? If recognised and identified as the one who was rescued last night from the fire at Huntingdon's house, how came she here? Wherefore was she brought to such a distance, instead of being taken to some dwelling close at hand? Ah! the

case is fraught with terrible suspicion, Ernestina—you must see that it is!"

"Oh! yes," said the housekeeper, with bitter lamentations; "it must be hushed up—it must be hushed up!"

"Then do you know what is to be done," said Ernestina, a sudden idea striking her. "You must send for Sir Douglas Huntingdon—tell him all that has happened—and throw myself upon his mercy. There is nothing else to be done."

"But if this girl was his mistress," exclaimed the Marquis, "he might seek a cruel revenge. And yet it is hardly possible that he can care anything for her, seeing that their acquaintance has only been of a few hours—Yes, yes," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself: "your advice must be adopted, Ernestina. Huntingdon would not ruin an old friend!"

"Besides," observed the nobleman's niece, "you will ascertain who the young girl was, and whether there will be much inquiry made by relatives or by friends into the circumstances of death."

"Be it then as you," observed the Marquis. "And now, Ernestina, for God's sake take this distracted woman away with you, and endeavour to console her—or at all events to make her hold her peace—while I send for Sir Douglas Huntingdon."

"Lady Ernestina accordingly persuaded the housekeeper to accompany her away from the chamber of death; and the Marquis, quitting the room also, and locking the door behind him, hastened to make a confidant of his valet Brockman, whom he despatched forthwith in search of the Baronet. In about half-an-hour Brockman returned accompanied by Sir Douglas, whom he had found at an hotel in the immediate neighbourhood of his own ruined mansion: and as the valet had not given the Baronet the least intimation of wherefore his presence was required in Albemarle-street, he was naturally much surprised at being thus peremptorily summoned thither. At first, indeed, he had refused to yield to Brockman's request, fancying that some treacherous or spiteful trick might be meditated against him in revenge for the part he had played in rescuing Louisa Stanley from the power of the Marquis of Leveson. But perceiving, by Brockman's manner, that the affair was urgent, although the valet declined entering into explanatory particulars, Sir Douglas ultimately agreed to accompany him to Leveson House.

On arriving there, the Baronet was at once conducted into an apartment where

he found the Marquis alone, but pacing to and fro in a state of dreadful excitement and agitation.

"Good heavens," Leveson" he exclaimed, "what is the matter?"

"Tell me, Huntingdon—tell me, before I speak a word to the point," said the Marquis of Leveson, advancing hurriedly and seizing the Baronet by the hand,— "tell me whether there is any ill feeling on your part towards me!"

"Not a whit!" cried Sir Douglas: "on the contrary, I was fearful that you would break off your friendship with me on account of my intrusion upon your proceedings at so critical a moment the day before yesterday. But my dear Leveson, as you called at Stratton Street and saw Miss Bathurst on that morning, you are of course acquainted with the entire mystery relative——"

"Ah! my dear Huntingdon, all the Miss Bathursts, and Clara Stanleys, and Venetias in the world are at this moment nothing to me," interrupted the Marquis: "for you see before you one of the most miserable of men——"

"Indeed! I do observe that you are pale and agitated—very pale," cried the Baronet. "But what is the matter? Is there anything I can do for you? Though having troubles enough of my own at this moment—what with the burning down of my house—the loss of a young lady in whom I had suddenly conceived the deepest interest——"

"Oh! now, *now* I am more wretched than ever!" exclaimed the Marquis. "Huntingdon—my honour, almost my life, is in your hands——"

"Good heavens! what mean you?" cried the Baronet, nearly as much stunned as he was bewildered.

"Will you swear to screen me—swear to hold me harmless—swear not to betray me——"

"Yes, yes—I will swear anything, if you only relieve me from this torturing suspense."

"Know, then, that the young lady whom you have lost——"

"Good God; has she fallen into your hands?"

"Yes—but I knew not——"

"Where is she?—where is she?" exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, seizing the Marquis by the collar of his coat "Oh! if you have dared to harm a hair of her head——"

"Heavens; how shall I tell you the dreadful truth!" almost yelled forth the

wretched Marquis as he writhed in the grasp of the Baronet."

"Villain, you have ravished her!" thundered Sir Douglas, hurling the Marquis from him with terrific violence: then dashing his open palms forcibly against his brow in all the wild fury of excitement, he exclaimed, "Would to God! that you had reported her death to me, rather than this!"

"Her death—her death!" repeated the Marquis, leaning upon the chair against which the Baronet had flung him: "yes—it is her death that I have to report—for she is a spotless virgin so far as I am concerned!"

The Baronet staggered back a few paces, and then reeled as if seized with a sudden vertigo: for despite the confusion into which his ideas were suddenly thrown, still was there a strong lurid beam penetrating them with a horrible clearness, bringing forth in dread relief the fact that the young girl was no more!

"Dead!" he at length muttered between his teeth: "dead, do you say?" he repeated in a low thick voice, as with a pale countenance and with wildness in his eyes he gazed upon the Marquis.

"Yes—she is dead," answered Leveson "and if all my fortune could bring her back to life, it should be surrendered up."

"Tell me how this happened," said the Baronet, pressing his hands to his brow as if to steady his reeling brain: then sitting down, he appeared to wait the explanation with the vacancy of look and the abstracted manner of one whose senses are in a whirl.

"I will tell you all—everything," said the Marquis, in a hurried tone of breathless agitation: and then must I throw myself upon your mercy. In the middle of the night some men brought that girl hither—I knew not who she was—I never saw her before—I had not bargained with them for the service which they thus thrust upon me. The men told some tale about you and the young girl having been together at a hut on Shooter's Hill."

"Ah! then I understand who the villains were," exclaimed the Baronet, indignation once more bringing back the colour to his cheeks. "But go on—go on."

"They brought the girl here, then after the fire at your house," resumed the Marquis; "and she was received into the mansion. Believing her, in plain truth, to have been your mistress, I fancied that her coyness was assumed: and perhaps I was too hasty—too importunate. At all events

she sought refuge in that very room which contains the chairs—you know what chairs I mean—and sinking into one, the fright I presume was too much for her—and—and she died!"

"Poor Ariadne:" murmured the Baronet to himself and averting his head, he dashed away a tear.

"On my life" continued the Marquis "I have told you the truth, Huntingdon. I have explained the events precisely as they took place; and I need scarcely say that every possible remedy and restorative was applied to——"

"Enough, enough!" ejaculated Sir Douglas, suddenly. "Let me see her."

This command, uttered with a stern and abrupt imperiousness, was at once obeyed by the Marquis of Leveson: and he conducted the Baronet to the room where Ariadne lay. On the threshold of the chamber, Sir Douglas turned suddenly round and motioned the Marquis not to follow him: then closing the door abruptly, he remained alone in the chamber with the dead.

Advancing slowly, hesitatingly, and with a sensation of awe, to the side of the couch, Sir Douglas Huntingdon beheld all that remained of Ariadne Varian, stretched like a beautiful statue before his eyes. Her light hair, swept entirely away from her brows, fell back over the pillow upon which her head rested—thus revealing the whole of that sweet countenance, with the delicately chiselled and faultless features on which a smile of angelic resignation appeared to rest, as if in the very moment of dissolution she had experienced the certainty that she was about to pass from the woes of earth to the joys of heaven. Her eyelids were shut close, with the brown lashes resting upon the alabaster cheeks; so that she appeared as if she were only sleeping. The lips had remained slightly apart, affording a glimpse of the pearls within, and thus strengthening the impression that she was not dead, but only slept. The slight drapery which she wore, had settled in such a way as to develop the gentle undulations and softly swelling contours of her sylphid form: the arms remained gracefully rounded, like those of one in a slumber, and not with the rigidity of the last sleep from which there is no awakening upon earth;—and the symmetrical beauty of the lower limbs was likewise revealed by the plaits of her virgin vesture. Alas! that this should be the raiment of the dead!

Sir Douglas Huntingdon gazed upon her with a sort of incredulity that she was

really no more; and for nearly a minute he thought she was only sleeping. He hoped so—and he earnestly prayed within himself that such might be the case. Yet the longer he looked down upon that alabaster countenance, the fainter grew that hope; while the stronger became the conviction that she was indeed no more!

"Yes—her spirit has fled for ever," he inwardly mused: "the young, the innocent, the beautiful has gone to that heaven which is her fitting home. She looks as if she did but sleep; and yet there is the absence of all vital colouring from those cheeks—and the breath comes not from between those lips. Her form is motionless, though not yet stricken with the rigidity of death. O Ariadne! I knew thee but for a few hours; and yet in that short time——But this is childish on my part," ejaculated the Baronet aloud, as he made a sudden effort to master his emotions: then feeling that his eyes were dim and that tears were trickling down his cheeks, he no longer sought to check the natural current of his grief;—and sitting down on the edge of the couch, he took the hand—the small cold hand—of Ariadne in his own; and averting his eyes from her marble countenance, he said aloud and with a passionate outburst of feeling, "I cannot bear to look upon that inanimate countenance, which was so lovely in its animation!"

Then for upwards of a minute he remained in that position, wrapped up in the deepest thought; until at length regaining somewhat of his lost firmness, he rose abruptly—threw one last lingering look upon the deceased—and then quitted the room.

On the landing outside he found the Marquis waiting for him; and in silence did they proceed back to the apartment where they had previously conversed.

"That young girl, Lord Leveson," said the Baronet, in a deep and solemn tone, "has a brother who will sooner or later come to demand an account of his sister. Of me will he demand that account, inasmuch as I had written to him to state that she had found an asylum—an honourable asylum—with me; and when he comes therefore to inquire for her, what answer am I to give?"

"You will not compromise me?" said the Marquis, in a tone of earnest entreaty. "Can it not be averred that, rendered houseless by the fire, the damsel was consigned to the care of my housekeeper or niece, whichever you like to name—but that she died of the fright produced by that conflagration?"

"Yes—this tale must indeed be told," said the Baronet. "And now let instructions be given for the funeral of the poor girl."

"And what name is to be placed upon her coffin?" asked Lord Leveson inwardly rejoiced to find that no exposure was to take place.

"What name!" repeated the Baronet. "There is no reason *now* why her real name should be concealed—therefore upon her coffin-lid have inscribed the words, *Ariadne Varian*."

"What!" ejaculated the Marquis, immediately struck by the name: "surely, this poor girl—"

"Yes—I know what is passing in your mind," said Huntingdon, in a mournful tone: "she was the sister of him the narrative of whose escape you have read in the newspapers."

"But her brother," exclaimed the Marquis—"is he not a fugitive? and will he ever come to claim his sister?"

"If I can obtain for him a free pardon, for which I am about to interest myself," returned the Baronet. "But of all this no matter;—suffice it for you Lord Leveson, to know that I am interested in the young man's behalf. Would to God that it were within the range of mortal power to recall his sister to life!"

With those words Douglas Huntingdon hurried away in a state of mind, such as he had never experienced before.

CHAPTER LXXXVII.

SYNGOPE AND TETANOS.

Dimly and feebly did a sense of returning consciousness steal into Ariadne's mind—slowly, slowly as the glimmering of dawn struggles against the mists of night in the eastern horizon. Whether she had fainted or slept she knew not: nor indeed had she the power to reflect upon the point—for her thoughts were all in confusion—not painfully agitating in the brain, but in dull, numb, inert chaos. That there had been a period of oblivion she had something like a distinct notion: but whether it had lasted for days, hours, or only minutes, she knew not—nor had she sufficient clearness of mind to conjecture.

But as the sense of consciousness came back—as this re-awakening of the intellect began to take place—she became aware that there was somebody in the room. She endeavoured to open her eyes—but could

not. Nevertheless, she felt that the light of day was upon those closed lids, and that it was not a stupendous darkness that weighed them down. Amidst the dull and agnant chaos of her thoughts, flickered upon her intellect a somewhat brighter beam than the primal one of returning unconsciousness; and this new ray of intelligence seemed to enlighten her the least thing more distinctly as to her exact condition. She became aware, indeed, that she was stretched upon a couch; but after that vain attempt to open her eyes, she remained for perhaps two or three whole minutes without any farther endeavour to move. Then hearing a voice suddenly peaking near her, the tones flowing murmuringly upon her ears without her being able to understand the words uttered, she instinctively attempted to turn round towards the speaker. But no!—She was round hand and foot by some invisible and unknown spell—enchained by some stupendous and indomitable influence—turned into a statue so far as her physical being was concerned, and animated with only just a sufficiency of the spiritual essence to give her a dim and twilight idea of her own condition.

Still was her appreciation of this condition too indistinct, too vague, and too obscure to produce any poignant feeling. Sensation she had, it was true—but so lulled, so steeped in a mystic lethargy, so dull, numb, and sluggish, that it had not sufficient vitality for any keenness of reflection, whether painful or otherwise.

Gradually the idea began to become strengthened in Ariadne's mind relative to the presence of some one near her: and at length it seemed as if an inspiration dawned in unto her soul, whispering the name of Douglas Huntingdon. Then she appeared to acquire a knowledge that there was such a person as he in the world; but how or when she had known him before, she had no distinct comprehension. She heard him breathing syllables of sorrow near her; and then she felt him take her hand in his own. A pulse seemed to thrill through her entire frame at that contact,—yes, thrill even pleasantly, as if it were the touch of life giving back animation into one on whom death sat heavy and cold: but yet that thrill was only faint and feeble—and it imparted not complete vitality nor broke the spell that entranced the maiden.

She felt her hand clasped in that of Huntingdon; and she felt, too, by the touch that *his* hand burnt with the fever-heat of excitement, and that *her own* was

as cold as ice. She longed—Oh! how she longed to return the pressure which she felt; for now a strange, vague, and ill-defined perception of the real truth of her condition stole into her mind and make her feel a desire to make known the fact that she was indeed *alive*! But not in the slightest—not in the faintest—not in the remotest degree could she return that pressure; not a muscle could she move—not a nerve quivered in response to her will. The faintest breeze has more power to shake the stateliest tree, than her volition could exercise over her own faculties of motion. Still as death—motionless as statue, she lay—with a gentle glimmering of the spark of life that was just conscious of its own existence, but could not make this existence known to another. And now therefore arose in her mind the conviction that she breathed not though she lived—and on the other hand, that she was not dead though animation was all but utterly suspended."

A still brighter clearness shed its influence upon her mind—that mind which thus, after having first awakened as it were in the midst of a vast hall where a single lamp burnt dimly in the midst of the blackness, now felt as if additional lamps were being lighted up one by one so as to set forth by these slow degrees some fresh features of the place. She heard those words to which the Baronet gave utterance with so much feeling—"I cannot bear to look upon that inanimate countenance which was so lovely in its animation!" Yes—she heard, she understood those words: she even perceived the impassioned vibration of tone which characterised them—the amount of anguish which they expressed! And again did she experience a thrill of the pulse through her entire frame—but a thrill that was felt not by him who held her hand and who believed it was the hand of the dead. Then this hand of hers was quitted by that of the Baronet: the contact had ceased—the fevered flesh and the marble cold flesh touched each other no more—and instead of the thrill of the vibrating pulse, it was an ice chill that struck to the very core of the maiden's heart!

But now she felt—intuitively—instinctively felt—that Sir Douglas Huntingdon was gazing upon her. Her eyelids were closed, as we have already said; but it was in looking upward as it were from the mind itself—by the exertion, so to speak, of an inner sense of vision—that she thus felt that he *was* looking upon her. She could even understand the look—she could

comprehend its nature—lingering, longing, sad and mournful. But, O God! why did she not return it?—just heaven! why could she *not*?

She heard the door close: and now she knew that she was alone. The silence suddenly struck her as being awful, awful in the extreme: and then too, at the same instant, a more horrible clearness sprang up in her mind—a fearful light flaming up in her soul! In a word, she understood all in a moment,—that she was in a species of trance—a syncope—and that she was believed to be dead!

Dead!—great heaven, what awful thoughts now sprang up in her imagination! Was the hand of death in reality upon her?—was she dying?—would she soon be really *dead*? Death! its bitterness was not past—its sting was there—and the grave perhaps would soon assert its victory. But to die—Oh! to die while she felt that she was so young—for her thoughts were now every instant becoming more vividly clear and more keenly perceptive,—to die so young, it was terrible! Then her brother, too—for she now remembered him and thought of him—yes, his image suddenly sprang up clearly and tangibly as it were before her,—this well beloved brother, what would *he* think, what would he say when he heard that she had died thus prematurely, thus suddenly? But no—she could not die—she must not die yet! Innocent, stainless of crime—aye, even immaculate, though she were in mind as well as in body—she was not prepared to die! She would move her limbs—she would turn round on that couch—she would raise herself up—and she would exhibit all the powers of full living, breathing, moving, vitality! Alas! vain, vain were the thoughts—vain the aspirations—vain the endeavours: so far from stirring hand or foot, she could not even move a muscle of her countenance—nor unclose an eyelid—nor feel her lips quiver with the breath of life!

We said that her mind had now a horrible clearness: and such indeed it was. For her thoughts began to flow in still more frightful and hideous channels—depicting all the paraphernalia of death—the laying out of the corpse (in *her* case perhaps a *seeming* corpse)—the putting on of the raiment of the dead—the enclosing in the shell—the screwing down of the lid of the coffin—the consignment to the grave and the shovelling in of the damp and wormy clay; Heavens! as all these harrowing thoughts swept through the brain of the poor young girl, she endured an agony of

agonies ineffable for human language—an agony all the more agonising because endured by one whose form was motionless and could not bend or yield as it were with recoil, trembling, or shudder, the dreadful influence of those thoughts. And now, with the extremest poignancy was the fact presented to her mind that she was not even *nearly* dead, but that her state was one presenting that phenomenon so strange, so awful, and so terrible in the history of human nature!

The horror produced by all these thoughts gradually merged into the more stupifying state of consternation; and then a dreamy repose stole over the young maiden, Oblivion supervened; and thus for a while were her senses steeped in forgetfulness. How long this interval lasted she however knew not; and when she returned to consciousness she became aware that her posture on the couch was somewhat changed. She was now lying completely on her back; and she felt that her arms were placed close by her sides, and that her feet were likewise in close and parallel contact. Next she perceived, by the sensation, that something was fastened under her chin; and as she began to ponder upon the meaning of all this, the recollection of what had passed just previously to the last interval of oblivion slowly came back to her mind, until at length the awful—the crushing—the appalling thought settled in her soul, that she was laid out as a corpse!

Horror of horrors! With full, poignant and vivid keenness, did all her consciousness return: and she once more became possessed of every faculty of perception. There was no doubt as to her actual position: she knew it—she understood it—she felt it all. She was believed to be dead—she was laid out in the usual manner ere being consigned to the coffin—and the winding sheet already wrapped her form! The thought of all this was maddening, maddening. Her brain appeared to be on fire—and the sensation of gnawing flames had she also at the heart, though that heart beat not. Her eyelids were closed—nor, could she open them! nevertheless lightnings appeared to flash before her vision. It was horrible, horrible to experience all this, and yet not be able so much as to relieve the harrowed feelings with a shudder or a shriek. For when something dreadful meets the eye or strikes upon the mind, it is a relief to shudder in recoil or to send forth an ejaculation from the lips. But here was the unhappy girl bound as it were in the adamant chain,

of utter petrification—a marble body with a soul of fire—incapable of performing the least function of life, and yet inspired with all life's keenest and acutest sensations!

All the faculties belonging to the mind seemed to have concentrated in themselves the vitality which naturally belonged to the body; and all the senses were sharpened to even a painful degree. Thus she could hear sounds the faintest and slightest imaginable—such as insects picking in the wood of the bed-stead with the noise of the death-watch! She could smell the clean linen which wrapped her as a winding-sheet, and which perhaps from the nature of the soap used in washing it, had a certain earthy odour that made it indeed appear the raiment of the dead. She could feel all the plaits and folds of these coverments as they lay loose upon one portion of her form and tighter on another: she could feel the linen passing round her head, and the cambric that was tied as a bandage to hold up her chin. Through her closed lids could her eyes perceive the light of the sun streaming through the curtains of the window facing the couch—those beams which borrowed a deeper redness from the hue of those curtains! Thus were her senses acuminated to the keenest edge; and as the body was left motionless, those faculties appeared to exercise themselves with all the concentration of vitality which they had absorbed as it were from the physical powers.

In the midst of her harrowing thoughts she heard the door open, and the housekeeper's voice say in a low and mournful tone, "Walk in—walk in, Mr. Stimson—walk in."

Then the door was closed again very gently; and two persons advanced up to the side of the bed—the housekeeper and the man whom she had called Mr. Stimson.

"What a sweet corpse the dear girl does make," said the housekeeper, assuming a whimpering tone and heaving three or four deep-drawn sighs. "Ah! Mr. Stimson, she wasn't here many hours, but I really had taken quite a fancy to her—she was so amiable and good: and I do believe that in the same short time she grew quite as fond of me."

"Poor young lady!" returned Mr. Stimson, in a hollow and lugubrious voice. "How come it all about, ma'am!"

"Why, you see, Mr. Stimson," resumed the housekeeper, "this young lady was staying at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's, and his house was burnt down last night. Such rapid progress did the fire make, that the dear girl wellnigh fell a sacrifice to the

flames; but a couple of noble-hearted gentlemen—one an officer in the Guards, and the other the son of a Bishop—rescued her at the peril of their lives; and the officer wrapped her up in his great military cloak. Then she was put into a hackney-coach that was passing at the time; and as Sir Douglas is very intimate here, he thought the best thing he could do was to send her to be taken care of by Lady Ernestina. The fright which the young lady received from the fire was no doubt dreadful; but we thought she had quite recovered, and didn't dream that she was in any possible danger. But about ten o'clock this morning the poor dear creature seemed to be taken so bad suddenly, that we got quite alarmed: and before we could even send for the doctor she was dead. Lord bless you, Mr. Stimson, she went off just like a child going to sleep in its mother's arms;—and with her dear head, poor young creature, pillowed on my bosom, she breathed her last."

"Well, ma'am," said Mr. Stimson, "it's a wery great satisfaction for you to know that you did your best, while death was doing his worst,—and that she went off like that there, with her head on your buzzum. She's as lovely a corpse as ever I had the measuring of."

"Yes," whispered the housekeeper: "hasn't she got a sweet pretty face—and her flesh is just like wax. Poor thing! the worms will soon make havoc upon it."

"Poor thing!" echoed Mr. Stimson, in his deep sepulchral voice which he purposely made as hollow and lugubrious as possible. "The worms indeed will prey upon the poor gal."

It can scarcely be necessary to inform the reader that Ariadne's feelings were now drawn to such an extreme tension, that it appeared as if her brain must burst and her heart-strings snap. She had no difficulty in discovering, from the preceding discourse, who Mr. Stimson was. He was evidently the undertaker. But the vile hypocrisy of that woman, the housekeeper—the false version she gave of the circumstances of Ariadne's arrival at the mansion—the assumed sympathy and commiseration with which she sought to play her part in the presence of the undertaker,—all this added to the poignancy and painfulness of the scene. But then the discourse itself—to hear herself styled *a corpse*—then the remark that her flesh was colourless as wax;—and lastly the observation—the frightful observation, relative to the worms soon preying upon

her—Oh! all this was the most exquisite refinement of ineffable agonies!

But this crucifixion of the feelings was not yet passed through. She felt the undertaker place his rule upon her to measure her length for the Coffin; and she heard him mutter to himself, in a low undertone, the exact measurement of feet and inches as he thus took it. Good God! how within herself she battled—Oh! how she battled for the power of sending forth one long loud thrilling shriek!—how she strove—heaven alone can tell how she strove—to force a vent for the transcending agony of her feelings! But no: all her efforts were vain and useless. The spell—the awful spell was upon her: and still like a marble woman was she animated with a soul of fire.

"And so you say, ma'am" observed Mr. Stimson, speaking in a low voice that was well suitable for the chamber of death, but yet with something more of a business tone than hitherto—"and so, ma'am, it is to be a very decent funeral—not over expensive, but respectable?"

"Just so," responded the housekeeper. "His lordship has entrusted the whole management to me; and I think, Mr. Stimson," she added in a significant tone, "that you and I can make everything comfortable between us?"

"Oh! to be sure," responded the undertaker. "Come, ma'am, tell me candidly how high you dare go: and then I can tell you how much profit you and me can sheer betwixt us."

"Well, I don't think his lordship would mind sixty or seventy guineas."

"Very good," observed Mr. Stimson, with a low hollow chuckle which appeared to issue from a coffin or a vault: "let's say seventy-five guineas, and then we can divide thirty betwixt us. That will make fifteen for your sheer."

"Agreed," said the housekeeper: "but you must send in a regular proper bill, because the Marquis sometimes takes it into his head to look over his accounts."

"Don't be afraid, ma'am. I will put down fifteen guineas for a brick grave, and it shan't be no brick grsve at all. Then, how many do you think will attend the funeral?"

"I don't know who will attend it: the Marquis, I suppose—Sir Douglas Huntingdon—just for appearance' sake—and that's all."

"Well, we can put down ten mourners," observed Stimson: "'cause why, the bill must be made out to look respectable. Ten mourners—that will be a

guinea each for hat-band and gloves, and a guinea each for the use of mourning cloaks; so there we have twenty guineas at once. Fifteen, as already said, for the brick grave, makes thirty-five. Coffin, fifteen—makes fifty; shell, five guineas— and use of pall five guineas—there's sixty. Hearse and mourning coaches, ten guineas—that's seventy: and ten of my chaps, half a guinea each—there's five guineas: and that makes up the seventy-five."

"Well, you really are one of the cleverest gentlemen I ever met with," said the housekeeper, with a subdued laugh. "But after all, fifteen guineas a-piece is very little to get out of this business."

"Well," observed Mr. Stimson, "I'll manage to add five to your sheer. Let me see—I said fifteen guineas for the coffin; of course I meant a first-rate oaken one; but I tell you what I'll do—I'll give a common one, painted and grained to look like oak—and that's the way I'll do it. The poor gal there won't be none the wiser."

"Ah! you dear clever fellow," chuckled the housekeeper in a subdued tone: "a man of your talent. Mr. Stimson, ought to have been Prime Minister, instead of an undertaker."

"Well ma'am, I think I *have* got a little talent," returned Mr. Stimson, with a complacent manner: "but I am very well satisfied with my vocation, and don't know that I should improve it particular by a change. But I think we have done here all that is required now!"

"One word," said the housekeeper: "when shall the funeral take place?"

"Suppose we say this day week?" suggested the undertaker. "The corpse is a nice fresh 'un," he continued, laying his great heavy rough hand upon Ariadne's cheek, "and won't spile. Besides, it will look betier to take plenty of time for the funeral; 'cause why, we are to pretend to have a brick grave and a oak coffin."

"Then let us say this day week," rejoined the housekeeper: and she thereupon quitted the room, accompanied by Mr. Stimson.

Ariadne was once more alone. Alone indeed: but, good heavens! with what hideous, horrible, excruciating thoughts—thoughts that swept like fiery arrows through her brain conjuring images from the charnel-house and the grave! Like ghastly spectres treading to the solemn measure of a dirge, did they pass in array before her mental vision. Yes—for she was treated as one that was dead—laid out as a corpse, and had just been an ear-witness

to the arrangements devised for her own funeral! She had felt the rule of the undertaker taking her measure for a coffin; and she had felt likewise his rough hand laid upon her cheeks with the cold brutal indifference of one who is accustomed to handle the dead! And then that woman, who had affected so much sympathy in her behalf, was now actually trafficking in her supposed death—trafficking for profit to be derived from the funeral of her whose fate she pretended to deplore. And then that coldblooded, heartless, hypocritical scoundrel—the undertaker himself—he also was making a market of the dead: he also was practising the slimy ways of the money-grubber in respect to the supreme and most solemn rites of mortality and of the Christian faith.

All these circumstances—all these reflections—combined to aggravate, if possible, the horror which previously filled Ariadne's soul: and she already felt as if she were in the depths of the cold grave, with the clay filled up over the coffin:

Again did the stupor of oblivion enwrap her mind: and when she re-awoke to consciousness utter darkness rested upon her closed eyelids. The silence and the blackness of night entombed her—stupendous night, always fraught with vague and dreamy fears even for those in fullest health, but now marked by ten thousand terrors for her who was alive in the secrecy of her own sensations, but dead to the exercise of all faculties—dead also to the world without!

CHAPTER LXXXVIII.

THE TRANCE CONTINUED.

Immediately upon quitting Leveson House, Sir Douglas Huntingdon repaired to Carlton Palace and sought an interview with Venetia. Lady Sackville at once received the Baronet in the breakfast-parlour where she was seated at the time; and pointing towards a newspaper which lay upon the table, she said, "My dear friend, it was with the sincerest sorrow that I read the half dozen lines in that journal which mention the fire at your house last night. It is however a subject of congratulation that you are safe. But you look dreadfully careworn and haggard —"

"No wonder, Venetia," observed the Baronet, "after all that I have gone through."

He then sat down and gave her an account of everything that had transpired within the last two days. Commencing his narrative from the moment when he parted with Louisa Stanley at Dartford, he proceeded to describe the perilous adventures of Shooters' Hill. He told Venetia how circumstances had thrown Ariadne in his way—how she had saved his life at the hut—how they had fled together—and how he had given her an asylum at his own house: he then explained who she was, and in confidence revealed to Lady Sackville's ear those particulars relative to Theodore and his sister which have been made known to the reader in a previous chapter. Lastly, he narrated the circumstances of the young girl's abduction to the Marquis of Leveson's house, and concluded with a description of her death.

At first, when he began to speak of Ariadne, Sir Douglas observed that Venetia's beautiful eyes glittered somewhat with a jealous uneasiness; and naturally flattered by this proof that he was very far from being an object of indifference to the lovely idol of fashion, he cautiously abstained from uttering a word calculated to show that Ariadne had made the slightest impression or a tender character upon his heart. He spoke of her in a tone of compassionate friendship, and speedily observed that a gleam of satisfaction stole over the features of Lady Sackville. But when he came to that portion of his narrative which described Ariadne's death—or rather her supposed death,—when indeed he explained now the sensual brutality of the Marquis of Leveson had been the cause of the lamentable catastrophe—Venetia's splendid countenance coloured with indignation, and she murmured between her set teeth, "That detestable Marquis of Leveson! will the day of retribution never dawn for him?"

"And now, my dear Venetia," resumed the Baronet, "I will explain to you in a few words the object of my visit. Indeed you must grant me a boon this moment—you must do me a service without delay —"

"You know, my dear Douglas," she responded, with a peculiar look of mingled tenderness and significance, "that there is nothing you can demand of me which I am not prepared to grant. Tell me, therefore, how I can serve you. But I think I can already conjecture:—is it not the pardon of Theodore Varian that you require?"

"It is, dearest Venetia—it is," replied the Baronet.

Lady Sackville spoke not another word ; but rising from her seat, quitted the room. She remained absent for about an hour, at the expiration of which interval she returned and by the smile of satisfaction that played upon her charming lips, Sir Douglas saw that she had succeeded.

"This is the pardon—the full, free unconditional pardon of Theodore Varian," she observed, handing the Baronet a paper. "Fortunately the Secretary of State was with his Royal Highness at the moment : and therefore the document is duly countersigned. I explained to them both a sufficiency of the particulars connected with the case of Theodore Varian to prove that he was as much sinned against by his late master Emmerson, as sinning : and I likewise told them in confidence a little of his poor sister's history. The Minister therefore made not the slightest objection to grant the pardon and as for his Royal Highness," added Venetia, proudly "of course *he* was instantaneously prepared to grant my demand."

"Ten thousand thanks, dear Venetia, for this prompt kindness on your part," exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon; glancing his eye over the paper ere he consigned it to his pocket. "And now you will excuse me for leaving you abruptly, inasmuch as I am anxious to transmit this pardon to Theodore Varian, together with the letter containing the sad intelligence of his sister's death."

"And do you purpose," asked Venetia, "to veil from Mrs. Varian the infamy of the Marquis of Leveson towards his sister?"

"Of what avail, Venetia, will it be to augment the sorrows of this already too unfortunate young man? Besides, I myself have not been immaculate enough in my life to feel justified in becoming the accuser of others ; but on the other hand I have so many faults of my own to screen, that I consider it but just to throw a veil if possible over the faults of my friends or acquaintances."

"Well, be it so, Douglas," observed Venetia. "And now depart to execute your purpose with regard to Varian : I will not detain you a minute longer. But remember," she added, with a meaning look, I shall always be delighted and happy to see you."

"Ah! Venetia, do not fancy that I am not likewise too happy to find myself in your society :"—then hastily raising her hand to his lips, he hurried from the room.

Returning to the hotel where he had taken up his quarters, he sat down and penned a letter to Theodore Varian. In this epistle he broke to the young brother as gently as he could the intelligence of the sister's death, which he attributed to the shock produced by the conflagration upon the previously attenuated mind of the young girl. This letter, accompanied by the pardon, Sir Douglas Huntingdon at once sent off by a courier to Dover in the hope that the messenger might overtake Varian previous to his embarkation for France ; but if not, the courier was instructed to lose no time in following the young man to the Continent. Having adopted these measures, Sir Douglas Huntingdon turned his attention to his affairs : for he felt for the first time in his life the necessity of expelling thought by means of bustle and occupation. Indeed, the image of Ariadne was uppermost in his mind : and frequently, did he find himself giving way to the gloomiest reflections, and pondering upon her whom he had known but for so short a time and who had been so rudely and suddenly snatched away from him, as he thought, *for ever!*

In the evening Doctor Copperas called at the hotel ; and on being shown to the room where the Baronet was sitting alone after dinner, the physician expressed himself much shocked at the tidings he had relative to the death of his fair patient.

"One or two circumstances have rather astonished me in this matter," observed the doctor as he sat down to take a glass of wine with the Baronet : "one is that the poor girl should have been sent to find an asylum at the house of the Marquis of Leveson, who is an unmarried man—or rather a widower : and the second that I, being the medical attendant of the young lady was not called in this morning when she was found to be dying. At all events, if his lordship had not chosen to send for me, he would at all events have acted prudently in summoning that truly wonderful man—the greatest ornament of his profession—I mean Doctor Thurston."

"My good friend," returned the Baronet, your two objections are very easily met. In the first place, it was necessary to consign the young girl to the care of some kind-hearted lady ; and being acquainted with Lady Ernestina Dysart, I thought it best to send the poor creature to her. Secondly, the Marquis of Leveson was unaware that you were the medical attendant——"

"Enough, enough!" ejaculated Doctor Copperas; "I am perfectly satisfied with what you have said, my dear Sir Douglas. But perhaps you will permit me to observe that in these cases of rapid sinking and speedy dissolution arising from fright, there are so many curious phases and phenomena that they never ought to be lost sight of by the medical man in attendance at the time. Now I feel perfectly convinced that if that very remarkable authority Dr. Thurston had been called in on this occasion, he would have given to the world a most valuable treatise upon the subject."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon was in no humour to converse with so tedious a personage as Doctor Copperas: he accordingly fell into a deep abstraction—and the physician, having dilated for about twenty minutes upon the merits of Doctor Thurston as a medical practitioner and the learning of Doctor Thurston as a medical authority, took his leave.

A couple of days passed; and the Baronet's confidential domestic James returned from Dover. He had succeeded in finding Theodore Varian, and had delivered to him the messages and the purse of money sent by the Baronet, whose advice it appeared the young man had promptly followed by repairing to Calais. Indeed, James had seen him embark on board the hoy; and thus was it clear that he had quitted England ere being overtaken by the messenger who bore his pardon.

The next day Sir Douglas Huntingdon proceeded to Loveson House to inquire how the preparations proceeded for Ariadne's funeral. The Marquis was not at home at the time; and Lady Ernestina Dysart, who detested the Baronet ever since his interference in the affair of Louisa Stanley, affected to be retained in her own room by indisposition. The housekeeper accordingly took upon herself to answer the Baronet's queries; and she assured him that the most satisfactory preparations were being made. Sir Douglas Huntingdon desired the woman to conduct him to the chamber where Ariadne lay; for he experienced an irresistible longing to behold once more in death that sweet countenance which had made so deep an impression upon him in life. The housekeeper accordingly proceeded to what was believed to be the chamber of death: and the moment the Baronet crossed the threshold a feeling of indescribable awe mingled with the profound mournfulness which already filled his heart.

But when he beheld that wax-like countenance on which there was nothing of the ghastliness or loathsomeness of death,—when he beheld it fresh and damask-like as it was in life—the only appearance of death being the utter absence of all vital tint,—he could not help exclaiming, "Good heavens! surely she does but sleep."

The housekeeper shook her head with an assumed melancholy, as she observed in a low tone, "When no positive disease or previous illness is the cause of death, the corpse frequently remains thus fresh and well preserved."

"Death!—is this indeed death? can it be death?" mused the Baronet, in a low tone to himself, as he stood agazing down upon that countenance so soft in its very rigidity, so sweet in its immovability, so full of ineffable expression in its utter stillness. "If this be death, then death is not terrible: no—it's nothing but a slumber a little more profound than that into which we sink at night—only, only to this slumber *here* there is no awakening! This is the eternal night that on earth no dawn."

While thus musing, in a low tone, Sir Douglas Huntingdon had bent over the form of the young girl who lay stretched upon that couch: and a tear dropped from his eyelash upon her cheek. With his cambric handkerchief he gently wiped it away, murmuring between his lips, "Poor Ariadne—poor Ariadne! if you had lived, the feeling which you had already inspired and which I experience now in my soul would have expanded into the strongest and purest love—and you should have been my wife!"

Then stooping down, he gently kissed her alabaster forehead, and turning abruptly away, hurried from the room, followed by the housekeeper.

If anybody a few days previously had told Sir Douglas Huntingdon that within a week he was destined to be moved by such feelings as these—destined to experience the influence of such melting, chastening, and reforming thoughts trooping through his mind—he would have ridiculed the prophecy and laughed at the prophet. But no man can say how soon the sentiment of love many animate his breast, nor how quickly it may enthroned itself in the sanctuary of the heart!

It was now the afternoon of the fourth day of Ariadne's supposed death; and during this period a profound stupor had entranced her thoughts at such frequent and for such long intervals that her soul, rent with a million tortures when awake,

was thus refreshed and invigorated as it were by those periods when its agonies were numbed in syncope and its thoughts steeped in oblivion. But to describe the reflections and the terrors which she experienced when awake, would be to recapitulate that delineation of the feelings which we have previously attempted. We may however observe that occasionally did a gleam of hope penetrate through the murky clouds that girt her soul—a hope that she might yet be enabled to shake off the trammels of this tremendous spell which was upon her and give evidence of her vitality before being consigned to the coffin and buried alive?

She was awake—and she was giving way to this hope at the moment when Sir Douglas Huntingdon paid that visit which had just been alluded to. She immediately recognised his voice as he stood speaking musingly by the side of the couch; and with that keenness of sense which has previously been mentioned, she could hear as plainly all that he said as if he were speaking in a much louder tone—whereas the housekeeper who stood close by, could not catch the meaning of his words. And by a sort of mesmeric influence, also, did Ariadne become aware that he was gazing down upon her. Yes; and it seemed as if through her closed eyelids she could even observe the nature of that look, so full of a mournful tenderness: and then ineffable feelings sprang up in her heart—and when she heard him murmur those words avowing his love and deploring that she had not lived to become his wife, the poor girl felt for a moment as if she were being suddenly gifted with the power to cast off the spell of the trance, fling her arms around his neck, weep upon his breasts and prove that she was alive! That was a moment—a single moment of beatific feeling for the unfortunate Ariadne: but the darkest, deepest, blackest despair suddenly seized upon her soul as she felt herself still tied down to that couch—still enchained in motionless rigidity—still cold and lifeless as marble in body though with a mind that was every instant flaming up with the accumulated violence of a thousand volcanoes?

Then she felt the tear-drop upon her cheek. Heavens! it seemed to sink down into her very heart. Oh! that tear! that tear! it was a pledge of love—Good God! what mockery for her to dream of such bliss as that which is concentrated in the word love!

Deeper—yes, deeper, deeper, down into the lowest abyss of despair was she plunged as all hope abandoned her. Then she

felt the tear wiped away from her face; then the kiss was imprinted upon her brow;—and then there were sounds of hurried retreating steps—and the door closed again—and she was once more alone. Yes: and once more did she relapse into that stupor which gave her mental energies the means and the leisure to repose, and regain their strength in order to put forth their excruciating vitality again?

When she next awoke she became aware that there was a candle or a lamp in the room. Through her closed eyelids could she distinguish where it was; and then she heard several heavy feet moving about the chamber, though with an evident endeavour that their tread should be as light as possible. A horrible suspicion sprang up in the poor girl's mind: and it was almost immediately confirmed by other sounds which struck upon her ears. These sounds were those of wood coming in contact with wood—one thing being lifted upon another: and then she knew that the undertaker's men were in the room placing the shell upon the tressels!

It instantaneously struck her that if ever the excruciation of her mental agonies should become sufficiently keen to inspire her physical being with new life, this must be the moment. If the asphyxia should now prove stronger than that anguish which was torturing her soul to such an extent as apparently to render it capable of inspiring marble itself with motion, then in that case did it seem as if all hope might be really abandoned. She felt her mind struggling within—or rather she made it struggle with all the violence of desperation to force it as it were to give vent to its feelings in any one of the numerous evidences of life: such as a shudder—a shriek—a stretching forth of the arms—a turning of the head—an opening of the eyelids—or even a quivering of the lips. But no: nothing of all this could she accomplish. Her mind was imprisoned in a form rigid and impracticable as marble: and it seemed to her as if she herself were vainly struggling for emancipation from the interior of a stone sepulchre in which, like a Roman vestal of ancient times, she was walled up!

But we cannot describe the full horror of her thoughts on this head: we must leave the reader much to imagine and depict unto himself. For now the moment—the dread moment had come when Ariadne was to be placed in the shell. It was from habit that the undertaker and his men trod as gently as possible in the

room—from habit that they spoke in undertones suited to the chamber of death—from habit that they laid their hands upon her gently and delicately. It was habit all: for in their nature they were no more susceptible of sympathy than other men. On the contrary—from being in the frequent companionship of the dead, they knew neither awe nor pity. Indeed, their feelings were much blunted and their hearts much brutalized by their avocation: and if a proof of this were wanting, it might have been found in the fact that the housekeeper, knowing their predilection, at this moment entered the room with a tray containing a bottle of spirits and several glasses. Thereupon the undertaker and his men turned away from the couch, and approached the toilette-table where the housekeeper deposited the tray.

"Now, ma'am, will you jine in?" asked Mr. Stimson, as he filled all the glasses round.

"Well, I'll take a *leetle* drop, so as not to seem unfriendly," said the housekeeper.

"That's right, ma'am. And now," continued Stimson, raising a brimming glass to his lips, "here's your wery good health, ma'am—and here's his lordship's health too—and wishing us all good luck:"—with which benediction the undertaker screwed up his eyes, as if to shut out the fume of the liquor as he tossed it down his throat.

Having refreshed themselves with a dram, the servitors of death returned to the couch, and once more resumed their hold upon Ariadne. Not the concentrated anguish of ten thousand racks—not the essence powerfully condensed of all the most refined excruciations of the Inquisition—can convey and adequate idea of the agony of agonies which the young girl now endured. All such ideas as the coiling of fiery serpents around the form—of burning alive in condescent flames—of tearing off the scalp and dropping boiling oil upon the brain laid bare—of flaying alive and searing the excoriated flesh with red-hot iron—of passing red-hot needles through the eyes, all such ideas as these, we say, fell incomparably short of the illimitable agony endured by the poor girl as the undertaker and his men lifted her from the bed and put her into the narrow shell.

This being done, the men retraced their way to the toilette-table, and regaled themselves with another dram.

"I never did see a corpse keep so fresh," observed Stimson; "there's no oozing out of the mouth—no discolouring under the

eyes—not even any particular blueness of the nails. And then, too, she felt as limp and supple as if only in a fit."

"But I shouldn't like to be only half as dead for all that," said one of the men. "Poor thing," he continued, with the mechanical utterance of the sympathetic ejaculation: "she'll be discoloured and blue enough in a few days—and she'll get stark and stiff enough, too, before she's put into her coffin and screwed down."

Screwed down! good heavens, what dreadful words—overwhelming as a torrent, devouring as a conflagration, crushing as a thunderbolt! Life appeared now to be really ebbing away from the statue-like form of Ariadne Varian: oh! how she wished that she might be really dying—that her spirit might be indeed passing, so that she could avoid that crowning horror—that transcendent catastrophe, *being buried alive*! Again did a stupor come over her: again were her senses oblivion.

The undertaker and his men remained in the room until they had emptied the bottle of spirits; and they took their leave of the housekeeper and their departure from the mansion.

Presently—she could not tell how long after the stupor had fallen upon her—a roseate radiance appeared to be shining all around Ariadne. She was no longer in the shell—no longer wrapped in the garments of the grave—no longer laid out as a corpse. She felt as if she had been wafted into some other sphere: and a strain of sweet celestial music came floating upon her ears. Then, as those silver octaves made the air melodious, she fancied that she beheld angel shapes hovering before her eyes—shapes of seraphs, and of sylphs, with azure garments and white wings. The music swelled into the divinest symphony, exultant throughout the vast regions of space; and it seemed to the maiden that she was wafted quick and unimpeded, but by some invisible power, through the starry firmament,—mingling with aerial beings of indescribable beauty. And ineffable pleasure pervaded her soul as she called to mind all the horrors from which she had just escaped; for the barrier between life and death seemed to be indeed passed over, and herself emancipated from the trammels of earth and now soaring in heaven. Presently a form of angelic loveliness and radiant with the sunniest smiles, came floating through the roseate atmosphere,—a female form clad in streaming robes of azure and of gold arranged in alternate foldings and spangled

with countless gems. The long yellow hair floated like a beaming meteor, diffusing an enhanced glory all around. But nothing could equal the celestial benignity and seraphic joy that mingled in that beauteous countenance: so that under this angelic figuration Ariadne recollected not immediately the features of her mother—her long dead mother! Now indeed she knew that she was in heaven: and extending her arms towards the advancing shape, she anticipated the next moment to be clasped to its bosom,—when all in an instant the sweet and ecstatic thoughts filling her soul were turned into horror and dismay—the angel shape vanished from her view—utter darkness suddenly entombed her—and down, down she sank as if into an unfathomable abyss!

Down, down she kept descending: down, down into the blackest darkness, where the only change was that made by hideous shapes blacker than the blackness, darker than the darkness itself! Yes—all was confusion and whirl in her brain—a series and a change of mental agony. Now all of a sudden a tremendous light appeared; and in the distance were seen the inextinguishable but unconsuming fires of hell. No nearer however to them did she approach—but kept falling down, down, far beyond the influence of the molten flames that filled the vast and blazing prison of Satan's kingdom. But as her eyes remained fixed upon that region of fire, she saw that it broke into the shape of immense buildings—vast palaces, tremendous domes, and colossal pillars—all made of the living flame and exhaling the red atmosphere which hung like a lurid cloud above it. Still also as she gazed, she observed the back-ground of that vast city of Satan,—a back-ground forming hills, and mountains, some covered with forests, others merely dotted with groups of trees, but all wrought as it were out of the lurid opaque fire. Still keener and keener grew the maiden's power of vision. She now beheld the windows of all the houses, mansions, and palaces in that city of hell; and she saw that those windows were defended by immense bars of fire. But now the entire city seemed to be made of red hot iron,—every feature of the place of one colour,—everything formed of one material. And through these bars she beheld myriads of shadowy forms, all red and glowing as if they themselves were penetrated with fire, or heated as it were to a candescent and almost transparent state. Keener grew her vision still: and she saw more. She beheld ineffable anguish depleted on every

countenance—an anguish such as no living language can describe. In the palaces she beheld the shapes of those who had once been the kings and queens of the earth; but their crowns were now of red hot iron, fastened with red hot nails upon their burning but unconsuming heads. Their sceptres had changed into fiery serpents—their orbs into scorpions of flame. The purple, the scarlet, and the ermine robes that decorated them on earth were succeeded by a flowing vesture of flame; and if in any region of hell the fire was hotter and the torture more agonising than elsewhere, then was this supremacy of all excruciations to be found in these palaces of the kings and queens. In the great mansions where the shades of those who had been prelates and church-dignitaries upon earth, and who having made religion a means to heap up wealth and honours for their own aggrandisement, were now deservedly enduring retribution in the ebbless and eternal waves of flame that swept through the mansions of red hot iron. And in other mansions were the lords and those who had been great ones upon earth, but who having made earth a heaven for themselves and a hell for the masses of their fellow-creatures, were now enduring the real hell of the other world.

But gradually all this tremendous spectacle began to fade away from Ariadne's view; and still she appeared to be falling down with the velocity of a flash of lightning—until all was dark once more. Then gradually she awoke to the consciousness that she had been passing through the phases of a dream wherein she had beholden both heaven and hell!

Then where was she? Were these thoughts—these harrowing thoughts that poured back into her memory, laden with horrible reminiscences,—were all these a dream likewise? Was it a dream that she had been in a trance—that she had been treated as one dead—and that preparations were made for her funeral? Was all this a dream—ah! dared she think so? But, no: great God! no—it was not a dream! She was *there*—in utter darkness—unable to move—pent up in the narrowest possible space: yes—she was in a trance—and she was in her shell!

Another two days passed away; and during the interval very brief indeed had been the moments of consciousness endured by the unfortunate girl. But it was now on the sixth evening of her supposed death, and while she was suffering the tortures of a more vivid sensibility than she had experienced for forty-eight hours

past, that the door of the chamber was opened—and again did the undertaker and three or four of his men enter the apartment. They bore something with them, too—something heavy and also hollow—something that knocked against the woodwork of the doorway as they brought it in—something ominous and dread to think of! Yes—just heaven! it was the damsel's coffin that they brought.

Her coffin!—but she is not dead—the light burns in her soul, although it ceases to shine forth to the view of the world: the lamp is not extinguished—the oil of life is not exhausted. Then wherefore seize upon her now?—wherefore carry her away from the midst of the world to which she belongs, to consign her to the raw damp solitude of the grave? Oh! it is because she is believed to be dead—and thus as a corpse she is to be treated. Now to her mind rush the many things she has heard in her life relative to people being buried alive—of coffins being opened years after the interment, and the wretched inmates being found to have turned on their sides or their faces, or to have gnawed their own flesh for sustenance: and now, just heaven! was such to be her fate?

Speaking of sustenance, reminds us to observe that though several days had elapsed since food had passed Ariadne's lips, yet that she experienced neither hunger nor thirst—no, nor yet that sinking at the stomach which is usually felt through want of nourishment. All vital actions of the system were suspended or suppressed in a physical sense: the body seemed to be dead—all its wants and necessities dead likewise;—and yet all the senses, how keenly were they alive!

Yes—the coffin was brought in and deposited upon the floor. The undertaker and his men then lifted the shell from the cressels, and placed it inside the coffin: they then raised the coffin itself upon the cressels, leaving the lid loosely lying on the top. Scarcely was this done when the door opened again; and the housekeeper entered. Ariadne knew by the rattling of the glasses that the servitors of death were about to regale themselves once more with spirits. Such was the case: but this time the tray was not placed upon the toilet-table—nor on a chair—nor on the bed—nor yet on the chest-of-drawers—no, nor on any articles of furniture in a chamber; but upon the coffin-lid itself! And then the undertaker and his men, together with the housekeeper, all stood round that coffin and drank the spirit which were poured out,

"Well, Mr. Stimson how do you think the corpse looks now?" asked the housekeeper.

"Unchanged and fresh as ever, ma'am," was the response. "I never did see such a beautiful corpse in all my life. We'll leave the coffin-lid off till the last moment, because the body's so fresh. If we screwed it down, it would precious soon begin to decompose."

Decompose! good heavens, to talk of this in the hearing of one who was not yet dead;

"Well now, the funeral's for the day after to-morrow, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon," observed the housekeeper; "and Sir Douglas Huntingdon has told me that he means to attend—so does the Marquis, out of respect for Sir Douglas."

"Well," replied Stimson, "we shall have two mourning-coaches—one for his lordship and the Baronet, and t'other for me and three of my men to look like mourners and make the funeral respectable. I always choose the most sorrowful looking of my people to go with me in a mourning coach and it has a very good effect. But last time—that was about a month ago—one of 'em tumbled into the grave when we got to the churchyard, 'cause why he got blazing drunk."

"Well, we mustn't have any drunkenness here, Mr. Stimson," said the housekeeper, in an authoritative tone; "the Marquis would be in a frightful way if you didn't all keep perfectly sober."

Here the colloquy ended—the liquor was disposed of—the party of death's servitors, together with the housekeeper, retired—and Ariadne was now alone.

Alone—in her coffin!

CHAPTER LXXXIX.

THE COFFIN.

It was the morning of the funeral. The blinds were drawn down throughout the front of the mansion: but no mutes appeared at the door, the obsequies being merely *respectable* and not *fashionable*.

From the period of being placed in her coffin, Ariadne had known but a few minutes of consciousness up to about ten o'clock on the morning of which we are now writing: and then she was awakened as it were from a profound sleep by hearing a strange noise. Gradually did consciousness resume its way in her soul,—that consciousness which every time it

returned after an interval of stupor, was accompanied by so many harrowing memories so many poignant reminiscences. But on the present occasion Ariadne was longer than usual in collecting her ideas and marshalling her confused thoughts so as to arrive at the comprehension of the full horror of her position. Indeed, at first she could not possibly conjecture, what that strange noise might be a noise which nevertheless grated so ominously in her ears and jarred against every chord in her heart! It was a fearful noise a sound well calculated to inspire dread horror even before its full meaning was comprehended. But when the damsel's thoughts settled down into the proper cells of her mind—when her idea became so disciplined as to take a consecutive order in her memory—then did the chain of her recollections lead her on to the comprehension of this hideous noise that was grating and jarring close by her ears,—and she felt—she knew—she understood that she was being screwed down her coffin!

Let it not be thought that during the many intervals of consciousness which Ariadne had experienced, from the first moment of her seeming death until the present time,—let it not be thought, we say, that she had forgotten to appeal to that Almighty Being in whom she put her faith. Far from it: all her thoughts during those intervals were a homage to the Deity and were interwoven with a train of reflections constituting a worship. For she had faith—the sublimest faith in the goodness, the wisdom, and the power of the Almighty; and thus was it that occasionally, as we have before stated, she experienced a gleam of hope—thus was it also that she had been led to dream of heaven. It was not because she experienced bitter, burning moments of agony, excruciating intervals of horror, and fits of the blackest despair,—it was not because she thus felt all the weaknesses of human nature generally and of her own sex in particular, that the reader must suppose she did not pray or that she did not maintain her faith in heaven. She *had* prayed—and she prayed now: in her soul did she pray deeply and fervently while the hideous noise of the coffin-screws grated upon her ears as they secured that lid which now seemed the barrier between herself and all earthly hope!

Her mind still retained a vivid clearness. She could think calmly, collectedly upon the past—upon the awful present—and upon the future in which she put her faith. She hoped that her spirit would

soon leave its mortal habitation and fly to those eternal realms whereof she had a glimpse in her dreams. But as yet, although the coffin-lid was screwed down, she experienced no sense of suffocation—doubtless because the faculty of breathing was suspended in that state of asphyxia wherein she was wrapped. But it was from the coming scenes of the tremendous drama that her soul now recoiled so shudderingly,—the lowering into the grave—the shovelling in of the earth—and then the remaining in the clayey depth, perhaps to linger for days and days—Oh! this was the horror, the agony, the anguish!

But while those thoughts were fastening their gnawing vulture-talons upon her brain, the door of the chamber opened, and she almost immediately heard the voices of the Marquis of Leveson and Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Yes—through the crements, penetrated those voices; and *one* sank down—deep down into her heart!

"Who will accompany us?" inquired Huntingdon, his voice made tremulous with a profound sorrow.

"I know of no one besides yourself and me who can attend as mourners," returned the Marquis. "For appearance' sake the undertaker and some of his men will follow in a second coach—"

"Appearance' sake!" said the Baronet bitterly. "But no matter—it must be so.

And now, if everything be in readiness

Here Ariadne's senses began to fail her—the stupor returned—and she heard no more."

But scarcely had oblivion thus poured its opiate balm into her soul, when the door of the apartment was opened hurriedly, and a servant made his appearance saying to the Marquis, "My lord, a young man desires to see either yourself or Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately. He wanted to come up—but I would not let him—"

"Ah! it is no doubt Theodore," interrupted the Baronet.

"What! the brother," murmured the Marquis: then seizing the Baronet forcibly by the arm, he said in a low but rapid and earnest tone, "You will not compromise me—you have promised not to compromise me—"

"No, no," interrupted the Baronet, impatiently: then turning to the domestic, he said, "Let the young man come up.

The servant withdrew: and less than half a minute the door opened again.

and a genteel good looking but careworn, and emaciated young man made his appearance. But the moment all the dread emblems of death—the coffin on the tressels—the undertaker and his men creeping about like black snakes, as they prepared the cloaks put on the hat-bands, and looked out the gloves,—in fine, as all the sombre features of the scene were embraced by that young man at a glance, he staggered against the door-post, and a deep convulsing sob denoted the fulness of his mental agony.

"Mr. Varian, I presume?" said the Baronet, advancing and taking the young man's hand.

"And you are Sir Douglas Huntingdon?" was the tremulous and indeed broken response: but although Theodore could say no more at the instant, yet he pressed the Baronet's hand in token of ineffable gratitude.

"It is a melancholy scene for you, Mr. Varian," continued Sir Douglas; "but you must bear up with becoming fortitude against this affliction."

"Oh! that I had been here in time to fling one last look upon her sweet face—to imprint one last kiss upon her forehead!" murmured Theodore, clasping his hands and sobbing convulsively. "It would not bring her back to life—it would not restore to me my dearly beloved sister: but nevertheless, it would be a satisfaction—a melancholy, mournful satisfaction——"

"Do you really wish it, Mr. Varian?" asked Sir Douglas, deeply moved by the young man's almost heartbroken anguish.

"I do. I do," he answered eagerly. "You know not, sir, how fondly—how devotedly I have loved that dear sister of mine. Ah sir, it was for her sake that I fell into the ways of error——But let that pass!" he exclaimed, suddenly checking himself as he was reminded by the Baronet's look that there were many strangers in the room; and although they of course knew who he was, since his name had been mentioned on his entrance, yet it was by no means necessary to enlighten them as to all the details of the past.

"Your wish shall be attended to, Mr. Varian," said the Baronet. "It is but reasonable—it is but just; and moreover, it will not detain the funeral procession many minutes:"—then, turning to the undertaker, he said, "Remove that coffin-lid once more—this gentleman is the brother of the deceased."

Mr. Stimson and his men immediately set to work to obey the command they had

just received; and in a few minutes the lid of the coffin was lifted away. Theodore Varian then approached, with that species of hesitation and reluctance which characterizes the first glance which a loving one bestows upon the beloved dead; but on reaching the head of the coffin, he stood gazing down fixedly and mournfully upon the beautiful countenance of his sister. Sir Douglas Huntingdon also approached and contemplated the pale wax-like face of Ariadne; and at this moment, doubtless under the influence of the fresh air, the stupor abandoned her again and consciousness returned.

"Behold your sister, Mr. Varian," murmured Sir Douglas Huntingdon, in a trembling voice: "how little is she changed, although in death!"

"She looks as if she only slept," returned Theodore, his own voice more tremulous still. "Alas, alas, poor sister! beautiful was thou in life—beautiful art thou in death: and now thy soul is in heaven!"

Ariadne heard the two voices—the voice of the Baronet and the voice of her brother: and her ear lost not a single syllable that either voice thus uttered. But now those voices ceased, and were succeeded by the stifled sobs that proclaimed all the bitterness of Theodore's anguish. Heavens! would no revulsion now take place in the conditions of her being? Yes—she felt a quivering at the heart—such a sensation as she had not hitherto experienced throughout her trance; and almost at the same instant her brother exclaimed in a tone wild with mingled hope and fear, "good heavens! her lips moved!"

"Alas, no!" said the Baronet: "it was but the fitful play of a sunbeam through the opening in the window curtain."

"No, no!" cried Varian, in a tone of the most passionate and fervid exultation: "it is no dream—no delusion—There behold it now!"

"Almighty powers! it is so," exclaimed the Baronet. "She lives—she lives!"

All was now the most extraordinary confusion and excitement in that chamber. Ariadne was lifted out of the shell and placed upon the couch,—a quivering of the lips and a faint or rather scarcely audible gasping, now being the unmistakable signs of returning consciousness. The undertaker and his men were hurried out of the room with the paraphernalia of death: Lady Ernestina and the housekeeper were summoned thither; and Sir Douglas Huntingdon himself sped away to fetch Doctor Conneras. Fortunately the

physician was at home at the moment; but scarcely had the Baronet explained to him in a few hurried words the resuscitation of Ariadne, when he exclaimed, "I will hurry off to Leveson House at once: but do you proceed to May Fair and fetch that truly eminent man, Doctor Thurstan."

Away sped Doctor Copperas in one direction and the Baronet in another. Doctor Thurstan was at home: and on being informed by Sir Douglas of what had occurred, he said, "Most fortunate is it that Doctor Copperas has hastened to take the case in hand. There is not another man in England who has such experience in occurrences of suspended animation."

While thus speaking, Doctor Thurstan put on his hat and gloves, and accompanied the Baronet to Leveson House, where in the meantime Ariadne had returned to complete consciousness. We need hardly say that the scene which then took place, between the brother and sister thus reunited under such extraordinary circumstances, was touching in the extreme. Theodore strained Ariadne to his breast and covered her with the tenderest caresses. Ernestina and the housekeeper, fearful that some explanation might take place on the part of the damsel relative to the treatment she had received at the mansion, besought Theodore to withdraw alleging as the reason that this prolonged excitement on the part of Ariadne might be followed by a relapse. But when the young girl beheld the housekeeper at her bedside and caught a glimpse of the Marquis of Leveson at the other extremity of the room, she clung tenaciously to her brother's neck murmuring in low and broken accents, "Do not go, dearest Theodore—do not leave me—Oh! do not leave me again, I beseech you!"

The brother saw by the affrighted manner in which her azure eyes swept their looks around, that she was in dread of those present; and it instantaneously flashed to his mind that she had perchance experienced some foul play, and that he was not as yet acquainted with *all* the circumstances of her supposed death. Indeed, when first informed, through the medium of the Baronet's letter, that his sister had died beneath the roof of the Marquis of Leveson, vague and undefined suspicions of evil had sprung up in his imagination; for the name of *Leveson* was known to him as that of a nobleman much addicted to pleasure. This suspicion now appeared to receive confirmation from Ariadne's

affrighted manner: but it was not the moment and it was not the place for him to make inquiries into past circumstances. Indeed, he had scarcely time to breathe a few reassuring words in Ariadne's ear, when Doctor Copperas arrived.

The young maiden at once recognised the physician, and welcomed him as a friend. The housekeeper, observing that Ariadne viewed her with evident mistrust and aversion, stole out of the room; and the Marquis speedily followed her. Lady Ernestina however, remained: and by at once adopting the kindest, most soothing, and the tenderest manner towards Ariadne, she made a favourable impression both upon the damsel and Theodore. In a short time Doctor Thurstan arrived, accompanied by the Baronet; and as Ariadne almost immediately inquired of the latter concerning excellent and kindhearted Mrs. Baines, he at once volunteered to go and fetch her. Ariadne expressed her joy and gratitude at the proposal; and Sir Douglas accordingly sallied forth again, while the medical men adopted such measures as their skill suggested to guard against a relapse on the part of the resuscitated maiden.

In about twenty minutes the Baronet returned with Mrs. Baines; and affecting to a degree was the meeting between that worthy woman and Ariadne. Indeed, Mrs. Baines declared her intention of remaining at Leveson House to act as the damsel's nurse until her complete restoration to health; and thus the now happy girl found herself the object of the kindest attentions and surrounded by friendly faces.

But in the meantime the Marquis of Leveson and his own housekeeper were seriously alarmed lest Theodore Varian should learn sufficient from his sister's lips to induce him to make an exposure of their infamous treatment towards her. Sir Douglas Huntingdon however, presently sought an opportunity of speaking to the Marquis upon the subject.

"Ariadne is now past all danger of a relapse," he said. "The physicians have left her for the present; and she remains in the care of my housekeeper, Mrs. Baines. Of course the chamber which she occupies in your house must be her home until her health will permit her removal elsewhere. Her brother is now about to accompany me to my hotel, that we may have some conversation together. He already suspects that his sister has experienced ill-treatment of some kind; and therefore it is my intention to tell him all the truth at once. But I trust that by my earnest recommendation he will be induced to pass over, if not

actually to forgive or forget, your conduct towards his sister. Exposure will benefit no one; and innocent though she be, would nevertheless wound the delicacy of Miss Varian herself. Her brother will doubtless admit the justice of this reasoning; and therefore I do not think that you need labour under any apprehension of his vengeance."

"I thank you much--most sincerely--for these assurances," said the Marquis. "Pray make my peace with the young man: and tell him that if a few hundred pounds will be of any service--"

"I am very much mistaken," interrupted the Baronet, with ill-concealed disgust, "if Theodore Varian be not quite a different person--"

"Well, well, there's no harm in mentioning the money matter," said the Marquis, painfully anxious to avoid exposure on any terms; for he knew full well that if it became noised abroad that his house contained such auxiliaries to his sensuality as the mechanical chairs, the indignation of the populace would be so excited that his life would not be safe. "But you and I, Huntingdon," he added,--on what terms are we to remain in future?"

"Lord Leveson," said the Baronet, in a tone that was rather sorrowful than angry, "I am not enough of a saint myself to enable me to take up stones to cast at you: but at the same time I think that there are extremes into which it is possible to plunge in the gratification of one's passions--and deep into those extremes have you been hurried."

With these words the Baronet turned away; and quitting the room, he joined Theodore Varian, who was waiting for him in the hall. The two left the house together--the young man feeling fully satisfied that in Mrs. Baines his sister had a tender nurse as well as a careful guardian and a true friend.

As for Mr. Stimson--he and his men amidst wonder and amazement at the resuscitation, bore away all the paraphernalia of death: but as the bill was promptly paid by Lord Leveson, the undertaker found nothing to complain of.

"And now, ere closing this chapter we must state that Dr. Copperas, on returning home, state down to pen a detailed account of the case of resuscitation, in the course of which he declared "that his treatment of it was materially assisted by the advice of that truly remarkable man, "Doctor Thurston:" while, on the other hand, Doctor Thurston likewise sat down to pen his narrative, which he interlarded

with many compliments to "that ornament of his profession, Doctor Copperas." These statements appeared respectively in the next Numbers of the *Scalpel* and *Splint*, and created a marvellous sensation throughout the medical world.

CHAPTER XC.

MOTHER FRANKLIN.

It will be remembered that the Hangman and Bonecut had resolved, after due consultation, to make away with the formidable Bow Street officer, Mr. Lawrence Sampson. Their project was to entice him, by some means or another, down to the dark crib in Jacob's Island, where three or four of the gang would lie in readiness to put the murderous scheme into execution; while the Hangman himself was to call at Larry's house in Long Acre on some pretence and get possession of the Police-Book. With a view to the effectual carrying out of this plan, Nell Gibson had been selected as the most fitting instrument of the plotters; and at the same time the Buttoner had been appointed as a spy upon her actions.

It was necessary to remind the reader of these particulars and we must add that although the Hangman's gang subsequently discovered certain proofs of what they believed to be Nell Gibson's treachery towards them in respect to their dealings with Sir Douglas Huntingdon, they had agreed, after calm deliberation, to conceal their knowledge of the young woman's additional perfidy in respect to the note which had been intercepted by the Buttoner. To that resolve they had come as we described at the time, with a view to ascertain whether she were also betraying them with respect to the plot initiated in reference to Larry Sampson.

It was now a week since the memorable night of the fire; and if, at about six o'clock in the evening, we peep into Mr. Lawrence Sampson's comfortable parlour at his house in Long Acre, we shall behold him sitting by the fire reading a book and discussing a glass of wine. Presently the door opened; and his housekeeper Dame Margery came to announce that a very old woman who refused to give her name, wished to speak to him. The Bow Street officer, who never refused to see any body on business, at once desired that she should be admitted: and accordingly the visitant was shown into his presence.

Dame Margery withdrew: and Larry Sampson instantaneously recognised the old harriidan, who, bent double with age, now advanced towards him, shaking her head and wagging her toothless jaws with a horrible kind of mysterious significance.

"Do you know who I be?" she asked, in a voice something between a cackle and a squeak.

"Yes—to be sure," responded Larry: "you are Mother Franklin—and you live over at Mrs. Young's in Bermondsey. Now then, what do you want with me."

"Ah! I thought as how you would know who I was," said the old woman, with a merry laugh, which nevertheless struck hideous upon the ear. "You know every body, Mr. Sampson—and every body knows you."

Thus speaking, Mother Franklin took from her pocket a round snuff-box with an indecent picture upon the lid: and while regaling herself with a pinch, some of the snuff got into her throat, thereby exciting so painful a cough that it seemed as if the old hag was about to choke, while the scalding rheum poured down her wrinkled cheeks, leaving her eyes horribly red and bleared. She was wrapped in an old dingy red cloak, with the hood drawn over her head; and she walked with a stick. Her whole appearance was therefore not unlike that of one of the lowest and most wretched class of vagabond fortune-tellers: and now, as she stood shaking from head to foot with that prolonged hacking cough Larry Sampson could scarcely avoid turning away from her in disgust.

"Well, what is it you want with me?" he inquired again, after a sufficient pause to allow the harriidan to recover from the effects of the snuff getting into her throat.

"I can do you a service, Mr. Sampson," she said, now taking a seat: "a werry great service too, I can assure you."

"But it is doubtless to do yourself a service at the same time, Mother Franklin," observed Larry; "or else you would not come to me. Therefore pray get to the point at once, and tell me what you want."

"There's a plot agin you, Mr. Sampson—a deep-laid plot," said the old woman, looking at him significantly with her bleared eyes "and if you don't mind, it will be the wuss for you—that it will!"

"Ah! I am constantly hearing of plots and schemes against me," observed the Bow Street officer, with an air of indifference: "but you see I survive them all. However, if you have really anything to tell me, do it quickly—describe your

motives in thus putting me on my guard, and also say what reward you expect."

"The reward I shall leave to you, Mr. Sampson," replied the old harriidan; "for I know you will treat me well. I shall be eighty-nine come next Feviverry: and that's age which you now, hasn't that Gibson gal been three or four times with you?"

"Just so," replied Sampson. What then?"

"She's playing you false, sir," resumed Mother Franklin: "it's all a plant of the Hangman's and Bencull's, I can promise you."

"I had my suspicions, I can assure you," observed Sampson, with his habitual coolness. "Go on."

"I'll tell you all—but it will be best to begin at the beginning. Well, sir, one day the Hangman called at your house—this werry house, I mean," continued the old hag: "and somehow or another he managed to get into a secret room of your's where there's a many dresses—and he also saw a great big book that you've got and where you write down everything that happens. Ha! ha!" laughed the hag, shaking her head significantly! "you see I know something worth your knowing—and you also see by the same token that I am telling the truth. Well, in that great book the Hangman read a many things, and all about your addressing up yourself as a knife-grinder and going down to Folly Bridges—that's Jacob's Island, you know—and getting chucked into the ditch. So, you see, the Hangman found that you know a good deal too much to suit him and the rest of the gang; and so he has planted Nell Gibson upon you to 'tice you down to the dark crib, where you'll be done for; and at the same time the Hangman means to come here to your house and get hold of the great book, so that it mayn't fall into the hands of any other Bow street runner."

Larry Sampson certainly was very far from being prepared for all this information: but he outwardly manifested no surprise. Surprised he however really was, to hear that Daniel Coffin had managed to obtain admission to his secret chamber: but what he was now told in respect to Nell Gibson, only confirmed certain suspicions which he had previously entertained relative to the purport of three or four visits which she had paid him."

"Now, Mrs. Franklin," he said. "I see that you are telling me the truth; and here's ten guineas for you," added Larry, counting the gold pieces down upon the

apprehended on account of the burglary and fire at the Baronet's;—while the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker likewise fancied that such was to be their two comrades' fate. Indeed all four villains made sure that the dark crib was surrounded by Sampson's runners; and for this reason they did not offer to lay a finger upon the formidable functionary himself.

"Although such a pack of hang-dog scoundrels as you," resumed Larry, "deserve no mercy at my hands, yet I do not mind putting you at your ease in one respect: and that is," he continued addressing himself particularly to Bencull and the Buttoner, "I do *not* mean to take you two up, nor yet your friend the Hangman, for that business at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. Not that I am over desirous to show you any leniency, but because I cannot make use of the evidence I have obtained to bring the deed home to you. So now," he added, "let me give you a word of warning—which is, that if you don't break up your gang, get out of London and disperse over the country as quickly as possible, I will hunt you all to the gibbets. Now I have given you fair warning: and I hope you will be wise enough to take it."

"And what's to prevent us from knocking you on the head and shoving you out, into the ditch?" exclaimed the Buttoner, suddenly struck with the idea that if Larry Sampson had not come thither for the purpose of effecting any arrests, it was very probable he was unattended by his myrmidons.

"You will not attempt any such thing," answered Sampson coolly; "because in the first place I should shoot you through the head;"—and as he spoke he drew forth his hands from his capacious pockets, each hand being armed with a double-barrelled pistol. "Moreover," he continued, "if you just tap at that window, three or four of my men will rush in from the gallery; and at the first report of these pistols, half-a-dozen more of my runners will break into the house from the street. So now you are forewarned of the consequences of any attempt to molest me."

The Buttoner sank down upon his chair again in gloomy sullenness: and Bencull, lighting a pipe; puffed away with the air of a man who feels himself in unpleasant circumstances, but endeavours to appear as unconcerned as possible. As for the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker, they tossed off frequent bumpers of spirits doubtless to arm themselves with courage

for any emergency that might ensue. But Mr. Sampson in reality seemed to have no inclination to push matters to the extreme on the present occasion; and replacing his pistols in his pocket he said, "Now Mr. Bencull, I will thank you to go first and open your street-door for me."

The landlord of the dark crib was too well pleased at this command not to obey it with alacrity: and the Bow Street Officer issued forth from the den of infamy. Immediately upon emerging into Mill Street he blew a whistle with a peculiar note of shrillness and Bencull, keeping the door ajar in order to watch till the "enemy" had departed, perceived that this was the signal for the runners to leave the vicinage of the dark crib. Larry Sampson passed up the street; and one after the other Bencull counted no less than eight runners whom he recognised as they followed at short intervals. Then, when the coast was once more clear, he shut the door and returned to the room where his three companions had remained.

"Betrayed—basely betrayed!" he growled forth as he replaced the light on the table and flung himself upon the bench.

"Yes, and there's no doubt as to who's betrayed us," said the Buttoner. "Nell Gibson alone have peached about that business at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. I dare say instead of having gone back to Mother Young's she's cut and bolted. But at all events I'll go and see."

"No, stay here, old feller," exclaimed Bencull: "let's do nothing hastily—for there's no telling how Larry may have his eye upon us. At all events let's see whether the Hangman comes back—and if so what he says."

This advice was adopted; and the four ruffians applied themselves with renewed energy to the spirits and tobacco, in order to cheer their minds after the scene that had just taken place, the particulars of which afforded them ample food for discussion till about half past twelve o'clock, when the Hangman returned.

Bursting with the fury of his pent-up feelings, the diabolical nature of which was reflected upon his countenance, Daniel Coffin no sooner entered the little room than he demanded what had taken place. In a few hurried words the required explanations were given, and he in his turn was then called upon to describe how he had fared in Long Acre.

"By Satan! I scarcely know that I shall have patience enough to tell you," he exclaimed, his naturally hangdog countenance

table." The next thing you must do is to let me know how you happened to discover all that is going on, and why you now come and betray the matter to me. Do this, and you shall have another ten guineas upon the spot."

For years and years past, the wages of crime had not been so abundant at any one period, for Mother Franklin, as the harvest which she was now reaping; and with a chuckle of delight she secured the first ten guineas about her person, and then proceeded to give those explanations that should ensure to her the second two guineas.

"Well, Mr. Sampson," he said, "the truth is that Nell Gibson has always been harsh and bitter towards me; and I hate her—I have long hated her. Then the Hangman, too—he jeered, and taunted, and laughed at me one night; and I swore to be revenged—for I hate him also. So, seeing that he had something secret to say to Nell Gibson, I listened at the door. Ha! ha!" laughed the hag, with her hideous cackle: "my ears were sharp enough *then*, I can tell you; and as luck would have it, no one disturbed me in the passage all the time I was listening at the door. So I heard everything that passed; that's how I came to know what was going on. Ever since—for this was more than three weeks ago—just at the beginning of November—ever since then, I say, I have listened, and watched, and peeped, and peered, at all that was going on; and what with catching a word now and a word then, and hearing a bit of a whispered conversation at one time and a bit at another, I found out that the plot was still going on agin you—that Nell Gibson had been to you several times with a rigmorole tale—and that she fancies you are quite falling into the snare. Well, Mr. Sampson, she's coming up to you to-night; and so I managed to get away for a couple of hours on some excuse, just to give you this warning. But if you want again to know why I do it, it is because I hate the Hangman—I hate Nell Gibson also. *She* has called me a witch—and *he* has called me a beldame; and *she* threatened to leave Mother Young's establishment if I didn't hold my tongue—and *he* tossed me a shilling—a beggarly shilling—as if I was a beggar! And so for all this," shrieked forth the hag, raising her voice in a horrible excitement, "I want revenge—I want revenge—and now I shall get it!"

The thrilling querulous tone to which her accents had risen, soon merged into a

cough, so sharp and convulsing that it almost seemed to shatter the old witch to pieces: and a horrible spectacle was she she with her toothless jaws wagging, her head shaking and the scalding rheum pouring out of her bleared eyes.

"Ah! I could let you into a many secrets if I chose, about the Hangman, and Nell Gibson, and all the rest of the precious gang," continued the hag: "and I will do it soon too—for they've all took to bullying and baiting me just because I am a poor old woman that will be eighty-nine come next Febverry. But here's one thing I'll tell you, Mr. Sampson but pray mind and never say that you heard anything from my lips or that I peached against them folks——"

"Oh! that is an understood thing between you and me," exclaimed Sampson. "Proceed Mrs. Franklin, with what you were about to tell me."

"Well, sir," she resumed. "from a conversation that I overheard it seems that it was the Hangman's party which caused the fire at some Baronet's t'other night——"

"Ah! Sir Douglas Huntingdon's, you mean," interjected Sampson. "But how was that?"

"Why," returned the old hag, "the fellows got into the stable with the intention of breaking into the other part of the house; but somehow or another their lantern broke, and the light falling on some hay or straw, set the whole place into a blaze. Ha! ha! all their wickedness shall come out soon; I'll unmask them, the villains—I will!" she cried again exalting her voice into a querulous thrill. "But I can't stay any longer now. I must get back as soon as possible. Another time I'll tell you more. At all events, I've told you enow for the present to put on your guard against your enemies, Mr. Sampson."

Having thus spoken, the harridan received the second ten guineas, and took her departure mumbling to herself. "Ha! now I shall be revenged. Daniel Coffin said he should have the satisfaction of tucking me up before he died; but I shall have the pleasure of seeing him swing to the gallows tree—ha! ha! ha!"

About an hour afterwards Nell Gibson was ushered by Dame Margery into the presence of the Bow Street officer.

"Well, it is for to-night," said the young woman the moment the housekeeper had retired and she found herself alone with Larry Sampson.

"Ah! it is for to-night, eh?" he said, affecting to fall most credulously into the snare spread to enmesh him. "And where is the conference to take place?"

"Down at Bencull's dark crib," replied Nell Gibson, fixing a searching glance upon Sampson so as to penetrate into the depths of his soul and thus assure herself that he really suspected nothing.

"Now, let us understand the whole thing thoroughly, so that there may be no mistake," he observed, motioning Nell Gibson, to take a seat and handing her a glass of wine. "According to what you have previously told me, the Hangman's gang contemplated some desperate and astounding deed of villany, the nature of which is however unknown to you. They have already had two or three consultations, from which you have been excluded; and now to-night the last consultation is to be held, to settle the whole plan and arrange all the proceedings. Is not this it?"

"That is exactly how the matter stands, Mr. Sampson," replied Nell Gibson.

"Well, then," resumed the officer "you must now tell me all over again exactly what you propose; because having a great many different things to think of, I may not perhaps exactly remember all you have said to me at our previous interviews."

"I can explain myself over again in a very few words," said Nell Gibson. "You must understand that at the back of the dark crib there is a sort of gallery, overlooking the ditch——"

"Yes—and overhanging it also," interrupted Sampson. "After you came to me on the first occasion, I went down to the Folly Bridges and took a survey of the place. Of course I had often been there before; but after what you told me I thought it best to get an accurate idea of the locality. And now please to continue your explanations."

"Since you have been down to the place to look at it so particularly," resumed Nell, "you may have noticed that if you get on the wooden bridge you can easily climb along to the gallery at the back of the dark crib; and there you can lie concealed, listening at the window to all that takes place inside the back room."

"Well, the plan is feasible enough," observed Sampson, steadily and composedly meeting the keen and penetrating look which Nell Gibson fixed upon him from beneath her eyelids; and thus while she fancied that he did not perceive how

intently though furtively she was watching him, he not only saw that he was thus scrutinized but also encountered the scrutiny without exciting a suspicion. "And how many do you think will be there to-night?" he inquired.

"Ah! there will be several of them," answered Nell Gibson: "for the best part of the gang are in this business: and that's the reason why I know it must be something of the utmost importance."

"And have you failed to wheedle the secret out of the Buttoner? for he is your fancy man, I believe," said Larry Sampson.

"The Buttoner is as close as the door of Newgate and as down as the knocker itself," replied Nell. "When he was drunk I have tried to pump him; but it was all no go. Besides which, the Buttoner never will trust a woman; and so if he did tell me anything, it couldn't be relied on as true—it would only be some invention of his to put me on a wrong scent. But I know that whatever the business now in hand may be, there's murder in it—and also the hope of an immense booty——"

"And how do you know this?" inquired Sampson.

"Because the Buttoner cleaned up his pistols this morning, and sharpened the blade of a hideous clasp-knife that he's got. He didn't think I paid particular attention to what he was doing: but I did though. Moreover, I dropped in, quite in a leisurely way, at the dark crib this afternoon; and I saw Bencull busy examining his pistols also. The Mushroom Faker arrived at the dark crib last night, and brought his pistols with him—and I heard him say in an under-tone to Bencull something about its being very probable that they should soon have more money than they would possibly know what to do with."

"But could not you by some means or another secret yourself in the gallery behind the dark crib and hear what is going on to-night?" asked Sampson, raising a sort of objection merely to prevent Nell Gibson from thinking that he fell too readily into the snare.

"If I could, you may depend upon it I would," she answered: "but it's impossible. I must get back now as quick as I can to Mother Young's; and I shan't be able to stir out again all the evening. No Mr. Sampson—this is a thing that you must take in hand yourself: and remember that when I first came to you, our solemn understanding was that whatever took place between us was not to be communicated to a third person. But I must be off

now," she exclaimed, rising from her seat as she heard a clock in another room striking eight.

"But I have not yet given you any portion of the reward that you stipulated for," observed Sampson.

"I will come for it when the business is over," said Nell Gibson. "Besides, the best and most welcome reward that I can have, is to revenge myself for the ill-treatment of the Buttoner—the insulting taunts of the Hangman, because I refused to submit to his wishes and the coarse brutality of that detestable Bencull. In fact, Mr. Sampson, as I have told you before, I have a thousand wrongs to avenge against those villains; and now is the time."

Yes—there shall be ample revenge for you, Miss Gibson," observed Larry. "Whatever these fellows plot and plan to-night, shall send them all to the scaffold. But what time will they be assembled in their ruffian conclave?"

"At about eleven o'clock," returned Nell. "If you secrete yourself in the gallery at that hour, it will be ample time."

"And you are certain that there is no danger of any of the fellows going out into that gallery?"

"Not a bit of it," responded Nell Gibson: "you will not incur the slightest peril."

The young woman then took her departure; and when she was gone, Larry Sampson thought within himself, "The plot is a clumsy one; and even without Mother Franklin's warning, I should not have fallen very readily into the snare. But that Nell Gibson is a clever and a cunning girl, and performs her part well. However she and her comrades will all be astonished at the lesson I shall read them to-night."

The bow Street Officer then resumed the perusal of his book with as much calmness and composure as if nothing extraordinary were on the tapis: but at about half-past nine o'clock he prepared to sally forth,—having previously, however, given some special instructions to his housekeeper relative to the mode in which a *certain person* was received during his absence.

Meantime the Hangman, the Buttoner, the Mushroom Faker, and Bob the Durrynacker, were all assembled at the dark crib in company with Bencull. This precious company were seated in that same room at the back to which our readers have been previously introduced; and the table was as usual covered with the

materials for drinking and smoking—or, as the men themselves expressed it, "a regular booze."

"Well, do you still think your blowen is staunch in this matter?" asked the Hangman, addressing himself to the Buttoner.

"I have no reason as yet to think otherwise," was the response. "But of course, after the tricks she has already played us, it is impossible to say. She ought to be back by this time; and then we shall see what she says."

"And if she did mean to betray us in anyway, how should we know it?" asked Bencull.

"She can't betray us into Sampson's power for anything particular we are doing at this moment," observed the Hangman. "All the harm she can do, is to put him up to snuff respecting our intention towards him; and in that case of course he won't come down and hide himself in the gallery."

At this moment a knock was heard at the street-door; and Bencull hastening to answer the summons, gave admittance to Nell Gibson. The young woman entered the back room with her wonted calmness and self-possession. Indeed, there was no reason why she should look or feel otherwise; inasmuch as so far from contemplating any treachery in the present instance, she had faithfully and as she believed, *successfully*, performed her part in the drama now in progress.

"It is all right," she said taking a seat next to the Buttoner. "Larry Sampson, having nibbled at the bait for the last three weeks, has now swallowed it completely; and he will be in that gallery at eleven o'clock to-night."

"And you don't think he suspects anything, Nell?" said the Hangman inquiringly, as he looked at her intently from beneath his overhanging brows.

"I am sure he does not," she answered, with perfect composure. "Or if he does, then is he the greatest adept at concealing his thoughts that I ever saw in all my life."

"Well, of course, he is all that," growled Bencull; "but I should have thought that you was more expert still, Miss Nell, and so you might have seen whether he took it all in for gospel or not."

"Again I tell you," said the young woman, now speaking somewhat impetuously, "that as far as I could possibly judge, Larry Sampson believed I was performing a real part. But I suppose that after what occurred on Shooters' Hill, you mean to suspect everything I do, and every word I speak? Now, then, I tell you

again, and for the last time, that you are wrong! I tried to save Huntingdon because he was the first man—in fact the only man I ever loved: and what I did the other night I would do over again; for I wouldn't have a hair of his head injured. But in other matters I would die sooner than betray you—yes, by God! I would die first."

And having worked herself up to a pitch of powerful excitement, she struck her clenched hand so forcibly upon the table that bottles and tobacco-pipes all danced and rattled as if the door of the room was upheaving with an earthquake.

"Come now, Nell, none of this nonsense," said the Buttoner: "we ain't suspecting you at the present moment. In fact han't we promised to look over what you did t'other night on Shooter's Hill, if so be we saw that you proved faithful in the little business now in hand?"

"Well, and you *will* see too, returned Nell Gibson sulkily. "But I suppose you don't want me to wait any longer?"

"No," replied, the Buttoner: "you can be off and get back to Mother Young's. There's enough of us here to do the business without you. But here—take a drop of summut short first:"—and he handed her a glass of spirits.

"Well, here's success to you" said Nell, her good humour returning—and she tossed off the burning alcohol: then replacing the glass on the table, she took her departure.

"I raly don't know what to make of that gal," said the Buttoner after a brief pause "I have been her flash man for the last three weeks, and can't understand her yet."

"She's as deep and artful as the devil" said Bencull, "and that's why I first of all recommended her in this job. But if so be she should turn her artifice against us——"

"Then, by Satan! she shall suffer for it," exclaimed the Hangman, rising from his seat and buttoning up his coat.

"Aye, that she should," said the Mushroom Faker.

"And I would help to do for her," added Bob the Durrynacker.

"Well, we shall know more about it presently, I dare say," observed the Hangman. "And now I am off up to Long Acre to call at Larry's and see if I can get hold of the police book. I hope when I come back in two or three hours or so," he added, with a look ominously ferocious, "I shall hear that Larry Sampson is deep down at the bottom of the ditch."

"Then jerking his thumb significantly over his shoulder towards the window, the Hangman put on his hat and quitted the room.

Bencull, the Buttoner, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker now remained together at the dark crib smoking and drinking and conversing on the business which they had in hand. Once or twice Bencull went out to the street door, to ascertain, as he expressed himself, "what sort of a night it was;" and returning on each occasion to his companions to report that the moon was coming out clearer and brighter, they with one accord regretted that it was not pitch dark, considering the enterprise they had in progress. For although none of the inhabitants of Jacob's Island might be supposed to be over particular, yet it was somewhat too serious an affair to have the eyes of neighbours catching a glimpse of any murderous proceeding by the aid of moonlight. But this risk must however be run; and the four ruffians made up their minds accordingly.

After repeated references to a huge silver watch which he carried in his fob, Mr. Bencull at last intimated that it was now eleven o'clock; and the Buttoner was just suggesting that they should wait another quarter of an hour before rushing out into the gallery, when a knock was heard at the street door.

"Who can that be?" said Bencull, in a tone of vexation. "Perhaps old Jeremy Humpago—or the Swag Chovey Bloak——"

"Well, whoever it is," interrupted the Buttoner, "he mustn't be let into our secrets. Tell him there's summut wery partickler and private going on——"

"Oh! leave me to make an excuse," growled Bencull; and taking up the light he went to the door.

But no pen can describe the mingled astonishment and dismay which seized upon him, when the flickering rays of the candle fell upon the countenance of Mr. Lawrence Sampson!

CHAPTER XCI.

THE RESULTS OF THE PLOT.

"Ah! Bencull, how are you?" said the Bow Street official, in an easy offhand manner. "The fact is that I wanted to have a word or two with you, and thought this as good a time as any."

Thus speaking, Mr. Sampson unceremoniously entered the house—passed by Bencull—and proceeded straight to the room at the back. Bencull, recovering somewhat from his astonishment, hastily shut the door and followed close behind,—the light which he carried revealing the person of the newcomer to the Buttoner, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker. These individuals were as much astounded as the landlord of the place had been, on beholding the object of their murderous purpose thus familiarly and coolly appear before them. He was attired in his usual manner, and had his hands thrust into the depths of his capacious breeches' pockets.

Entering the room and throwing himself leisurely upon a chair, Mr. Sampson glanced around him with a peculiar smile, observing "Well, there are no strange faces here. I have had the pleasure of being acquainted with every one of you for a long time past—personally at least if not to speak to."

There was a slight accent of irony in his tone and a similar expression in his look; so that the four ruffians exchanged dubious and inquiring glances with each other, as much as to say, "What on earth does all this mean?" Indeed, they knew not what to think nor what to do; but with a sort of consternation upon them they awaited in silence for Larry Sampson to explain himself farther."

"Now, my good friends," resumed the officer, pushing his chair back against the wall so that no one could get behind him, and then lounging in it with an easy and confident manner, as if he felt assured that though in the lion's den, he was perfectly safe: "now, my good friends," he repeated, "don't you think that all your united wisdom—especially when combined with that of Daniel Coffin—should have devised some scheme more feasible and likely-looking than this clumsy affair which you have trumped up to ensnare me?"

"Trapped by goles!" exclaimed Bencull, his countenance becoming black as thunder.

"Nosed upon, as sure as fate!" muttered the Mushroom Faker.

"Done brown!" added Bob the Durrynacker, also in an under-tone.

"Perdition seize that Nell Gibson!" murmured the Buttoner between his set teeth, as he clenched his hands with convulsive violence,—his mind being already intent on a horrible revenge for what he supposed to be the perfidy of his mistress.

"Need I tell you what ridiculous figures you cut?" resumed Larry Sampson, secretly enjoying their confusion: "but I only wish that your accomplice Nell Gibson was here, to see how completely all her artifices have been penetrated by me. As for your friend the Hangman, I suppose he has gone up to my house in the hope of obtaining possession of my secret register. He will be miserably disappointed," added the officer drily.

"You are talking the Chinese langvidge. Mr. Sampson," growled Bencull, endeavouring to put a good face on the matter, if possible. "We don't understand you there ain't no plot—no scheme—no nothink——"

"Denial is useless, my good fellow," interrupted the officer. "You expected that I should be concealed in the gallery outside here at eleven o'clock: but instead of that, I thought it would be better to drop in as I have done, and tell you to beware in future how you plot against me. After the glimpse which the Hangman obtained of my secret book one day, he should have known that there are few things done in London which escape my knowledge: and perhaps you will be surprised when I tell you that the origin of the fire at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's House a week ago is known to me——"

"Then, by goles!" shouted Bencull starting from his seat, "there's no doubt as to who——"

"No doubt at all!" exclaimed the Buttoner, dashing his clenched fist violently against the table.

"Patience, patience," said Larry Sampson coolly. "I tell you that it is vain and useless for you to conjecture how I obtained my information. Every crime committed in London is known to me; but it doesn't always suit my purposes to bring them at once to justice"—then fixing his eyes upon Bencull and the Buttoner, he said, "You two men and Daniel Coffin were the authors of that fire at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's! You forced an entrance into the stable with the intention of breaking into the dwelling-house: but the light fell from your lantern, and the place was soon in a blaze. Is this true?" or is it not? "Fools!" ejaculated Larry Sampson contemptuously; "if such a mysterious circumstance as that is known to me in all its details, how do you think that this miserable clumsy under-plot of your's could escape my knowledge?"

Bencull and the Buttoner now exchanged looks of gloomy alarm: for they felt persuaded that they were about to be